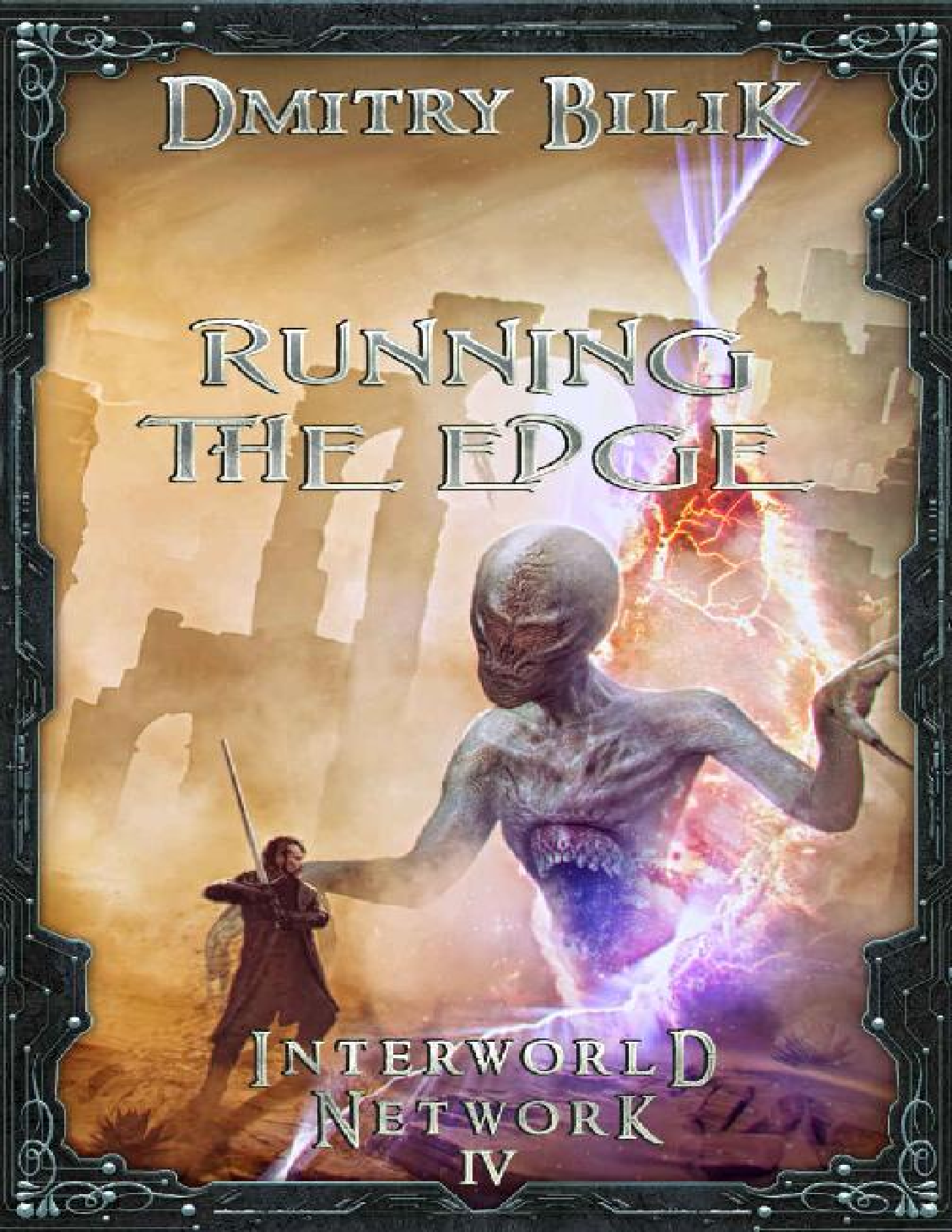
Dmitry Bilik

Running the Edge



Interworld Network IV

Running the Edge

a novel
by Dmitry Bilik

Interworld Network
Book#4

Magic Dome Books

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Chapter 1

RARE IS THE MAN capable of making it to the middle of a week-long drinking binge without flaking out. Firstly, simply because you need to be strong enough physically to do so in the first place. No lame excuses like chest pains, headaches or high blood pressure. Secondly, you need willpower — because personally, after the first couple of days of indulgence I would simply get bored. And thirdly, because you need to give it your all with no stupid distractions like family, work or other petty matters.

Conveniently, this time it had all come together, allowing me to pass all three requirements with flying colors. If the truth were known, I wasn't even sure how long my alcoholic escapades had lasted. In any case, judging by how I felt, it must have been a bit longer than necessary. Or it could be the fact that I'd awoken to find myself contorted like some ancient Indian yogi, with my legs on the bed and my thick head lying on the floor, throbbing from the combined effects of the energy of Qi and my own blood flow.

Any further séjour on the cold lino was becoming quite uncomfortable, forcing me back to my feet with the kinds of groans, sighs and cussing you can normally only hear in amateur porn movies where the hapless actors can only manage a few stifled chuckles instead of the outings of carnal passion.

"Bumpkin!" I heard someone call for my house goblin in the hoarse voice of a homeless lush down on his luck. It took me a couple of seconds to realize it was my own. "Bumpkin!"

I thought I'd glimpsed something dash past — but no one seemed too eager to spring to attention in front of me. He must have been hiding from me, the hairy bastard.

Never mind. We were big enough to manage.

My first few steps didn't come easy. It felt as if I'd only learned to walk a few days ago, only to have forgotten it again over the course of the last night.

No, forget the night. Judging by the twilight thickening outside my window, evening was only about to fall. There's nothing worse than sleeping the whole day only to wake up just before nighttime. You're guaranteed to walk around feeling like a zombie. And it gets even worse when you've just had a skinful of alcohol to boot.

Unhastily — because I couldn't do it otherwise even if I wanted to — I started on my way toward the kitchen but stopped, cussing. There was a bell tolling away in my head, and it was pretty obvious it was tolling for me. My palate felt as if it had been scrubbed with fiber glass, then served as a litter tray for a bunch of alley cats. My trembling hands were propping me up against the wall while my rubbery legs did a very bad job of conveying me across the floor. It took me at least a minute to cover a distance of thirty-odd feet.

I opened the fridge and very nearly cried with emotion at the sight of a chilled bottle of beer sitting on one of its glass shelves. Yesss!

I gulped the precious beverage down without even noticing it. The ringing in my head subsided somewhat as the blissful nectar spread through my body. I slumped onto a stool, clinking the empty bottles that littered the floor. What idiot had left them lying around here?

No, I still wasn't in a good way. What can be better than a bottle of beer? Two bottles, of course.

I didn't waste any time. After only a couple of minutes, I was already donning my trench coat and shoving my bare feet into my boots. Seeing as I'd slept fully dressed, putting my pants on was just one problem less.

I slid my hand into my pocket, discovering a few crispy banknotes. I still had some money. Good.

Just as I unlocked the door, I heard the clinking of a bottle coming from the kitchen. “Bumpkin?”

Silence was my answer.

“Ah, whatever. You can go to hell, mister.”

Our stairwell turned out to be surprisingly deserted, allowing me to amble down and get out of the house without any further ado. Now! Birds migrate to the south, and we were off to the shops.

I went through my pockets looking for my telephone, simply because I was getting quite curious about what time it was. Still, I couldn’t find it.

That was strange. I couldn’t for the life of me remember losing it. Having said that, the last few days had done a very bad job of resurfacing in my memory. They felt like loose pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which was yet to be put together.

What I did find was a crumpled pack of Kent and my lighter. Out of a year-long habit, I pulled a cigarette out with my teeth and almost lit it up when I stopped in my tracks. Hadn’t I quit? Or had I started up again?

I put the cigarette back, just in case. I didn’t feel like smoking, anyway. I was a bit queasy and feverish.

With an unstable jazzy gait, I staggered toward the fateful supermarket which had once become the springboard for my wretched career as a Player. As I crossed the road, someone honked at me, adding a handful of choice cuss words to their angry tirade.

I gave them the finger. I probably shouldn't have. But I only realized the error of my ways after their cussing had grown louder and closer, forcing me to turn my head and pay attention.

"Are you nuts, you idiot?"

When I caught sight of him, I very nearly said yes I was. He was tall and sinewy, and dudes like that can be agile and can throw very fast punches. This one, too, was already getting out of his Daewoo Nexia's driver's seat, with obvious intentions.

Having said that, I could give a good account of myself too. "Could" being the operative word because for some reason, I didn't feel like it. I just waited for him to get close and activated *Smoke and Mirrors*, then continued on my way. My antagonist zoned out for several seconds, looking completely lost, then got back into his car and drove off.

My physical state was still pretty shitty. It looked like the healing properties of the earlier beer had somehow worn off in these subzero temperatures. I needed a refill.

Dammit! This was exactly what children were supposed to be for. All those fables about having someone to fetch you a glass of water in your old age are hypocrisy, pure and simple. Having someone to fetch you a beer when you're not up to making it to the shops yourself, now that's already something. Having said that, you first needed to raise the brat to the age of consent. Oh no. Way too complicated. I'd manage, thank you very much.

I caught a few weird glances in the supermarket. That's how you look at the local nutter who walks around without a stitch on, singing Death Metal. One of the girls on the cash register even heaved a sigh, shaking a disapproving head.

For some reason, that made me feel like hitting her with some destruction spell. Still, I refrained. I had to remain calm. This was just a hangover, nothing else.

To save myself another trip, I also bought a large bottle of Absolute vodka. As they say, your girl can dump you, your friends can leave you, but vodka always stays at 40 degrees.

Once I'd left the supermarket, I stashed everything away in my inventory. Well, almost. I opened one of the beers and took a few greedy swigs. Life goes on, gentlemen of the jury!

I headed home, feeling a bit happier and just a bit tipsy. Which can't have happened with just a couple of beers. It must have been the effects of the last skinful. Still, I'd almost made it back to my front door when a Korl Player stepped in my way.

"Are you Serge?"

"If it's the Seers that sent you, you can stuff their—" I began, trying to get past.

He whipped a dart out of his inventory. Then, with a small flourish of his hand, he launched it at me.

I wasn't in the right state to show any miraculous agility. I only managed to duck an inch, and that only thanks to my Lability. As a result, I caught the tip of it in my shoulder and not my chest — which hadn't been part of my plans, either.

[∞]

It was the first time that I'd ever rewound time at the exact moment of me saying something, just as I was telling my opponent the four-letter address of the place where he could stuff the Seers' message. Still, I doubted very much this dude was from their ignominious Order. As far as I could remember, they'd been dying to become my best friends with every fiber of their rotten little hearts. And that sort of precluded them from launching any sharp objects at me.

Never mind. Everything in due time. I was bound to find out who the hell this guy was and what he wanted from me — but not before I'd chilled out his hot Nordic temper.

I watched the dart whistle past the exact spot where I'd been standing only a split second ago. Funnily enough, my head seemed to have cleared a little. Don't get me wrong: I did know all about adrenaline's neutralizing effect on alcohol. It's just that I hadn't expected it to have worked quite so quickly.

Never mind. Where were my evil overlords' black masks? Where were these so-called Dark Avatars?

Besides the two I knew of, I now also had a third one. This one was gray. I couldn't remember me having selected yet another Avatar.

In any case, I couldn't wear it quite yet.

Divine Avatar: Reaper

Activation requires 0 pt. Karma

It just didn't make sense. Why zero? That would make it even more useless than the Avatars of Light. It was a good job I still had some of my evil Avatars' abilities left.

Having said that, Destroyer had only one active ability at the moment, which was Spilling the Beans, but it wouldn't be of much use to me now. At least Conqueror had two abilities already available, as both Panic and Leader had reactivated after a cooldown. If I remembered rightly, last time Leader had done a fine job.

The dart clanged impotently against my black armor, glancing off it. That seemed to have clearly dissuaded my opponent. No wonder: it's not every day you meet Iron Man in the flesh, so to speak. What are you even

supposed to say in such a situation? Ah, here is goes. “You have no idea what you are dealing with.”

Whatever the case, the Korl didn’t take too long to recover from his initial shock and was already showering me with all sorts of Destruction spells. Still, he soon realized that they didn’t seem to be dealing the damage they were supposed to. For that reason, he made the wisest decision of them all: that of a hasty retreat. Or to be completely blunt, he scuttled away like a rabid moose with a wasp up his backside.

Still, I had my own plans for the poor bastard.

Incremental Apparition worked almost like a dream. The only trouble was, I slipped (because those wretched hob-nailed boots of mine were quite useless in the snow). Still, I did keep my balance, and even managed to grab the fleeing Korl by the throat.

It must have been a day of revelations for him today. First, his victim had somehow donned some magic armor, and then it began to teleport just to cut off his escape routes.

In the meantime, I lifted him over the ground and asked him in a voice so soft and gentle it could have healed a week’s worth of constipation, “Who put the hit out on me?”

“If I tell you, I’m as good as dead.”

“You’re already dead, only you don’t know it yet. So are you going to talk or—”

He chose the “or” option, whipping a dagger out of his inventory and sinking it neatly into my side through a narrow joint in my armor.

Admittedly, the strike wasn’t that lucky. The tip of the dagger barely sliced through my skin, just grazing my flesh. With a well-calculated shrug,

I caught the blade between my armor. With a crunch, it disintegrated in my hapless opponent's hand.

"So you're not gonna tell me, then?"

"Others will come in my place," the Korl replied coolly.

There was no fear in his eyes. Someone like him would never talk.

"All the worse for them," I said, adding a little more pressure.

His vertebrae crumpled. His eyes glazed over, turning into two lifeless pieces of old plexiglass. Then his body disappeared. Only a moment ago, I'd been holding the entire weight of this stranger's body in my hands — and now I was staring at his grey ashes crumbling into the dirty snow.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Anabiot****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Energetic skill.

You've gained the Summoning the Fallen Warrior spell.

I crouched, rummaging through his remains, looking for something that might shed some light on the reasons for this meaningless attack.

Cotton Pants of a Messenger

+10 to Athletics

+ 3 to Unarmored Combat

+ 2 to Resistance

Satin Shirt of a Buccaneer

+ 3 to Acrobatics

+1 to Athletics

Leather-Trimmed Waistcoat of a Highway Man

+ 5 to Stealth

+ 2 to Light Armor

+ 2 to Burglary

Steel-studded Jacket of a Deranged Wizard

+ 5 to Medium Armor

+ 3 to Sorcery

+ 3 to Mysticism

- 1 to Hand-to-Hand Fighting

Worn-Out Fur-lined Boots

+4 to parrying

-2 to Athletics

Immobilizing Dart

Paralyzes its victim for 5 seconds. Completely ignores the Blanket spell.

Yeah right. Shame it had nothing to offer against Conqueror's dark armor. I'd love to know though what he'd intended to do with me in those five seconds.

Thus pondering, I came across another dart, identical to the first one, and stashed it in my inventory, then scooped up all the clothes. The pants I was gonna swap anyway. As for the shirt, I wasn't so sure as it was quite unpleasant to the touch. The vest, however, looked quite interesting — as opposed to the jacket. I wasn't yet prepared to trade my level-scalable trench coat for this questionable apparel. Ditto for the boots: they just didn't impress me much.

I waited for the wind to blow the ashes away, then picked up the dust. He didn't have much on him: 316 grams in total. Having said that, I'd already somehow managed to amass a whopping three kilos of loose change. Talk about a fool and his gold.

Once back home, I put the shopping away, threw the Korl's clothes on the kitchen table, opened a beer and set to thinking.

Someone wanted to kidnap me. Kidnap — but not kill me, judging by the two darts sitting in my inventory. So it had to be a Mugger. Which didn't surprise me in the slightest. What did interest me was that the Korl hadn't struck me as a top-level Player. Just a run-of-the-mill Seeker — but still, he appeared more than sure of himself. He hadn't had a single Mantle or Blanket spell on him. It was as if he'd been tipped off that his victim — namely, yours truly — was absolutely wasted and ripe for the picking.

I eyed the vodka bottle with a heavy feeling. Sorry girl, all good things have to come to an end.

I put the Absolute away in the fridge and emptied the remaining beers into the sink. It was time I got a grip of myself.

I staggered into the bathroom, only to be met with horror. The bathroom mirror reflected the spent face of a down-and-out half-blood Korl.

Black bags hung under my eyes; my disheveled hair could have done with a wash; one of my eyebrows was split and caked in blood. No wonder it was itching.

My face was gaunt, my shoulders stooped. Had I lost weight or something? How long do you need to drink to get like this? *Mind Control* was still inactive while *Leader* was still in cooldown. Which made the “x” in the equation more than 3 but less than 6. I definitely needed more data.

“Bumpkin!”

This time I didn’t sound so ingratiating: no longer the drunk wanting to rid himself of a hangover. My voice was stern and confident — the kind of tone you use to call your dog when it’s been sniffing a tree for too long. It must have done the trick, because my dear house goblin materialized instantly with a suspiciously loud popping sound.

He admittedly looked quite scruffy — if this is the word you can use to describe a hairball staring at you with two huge tearful eyes. Apart from this, he seemed to be missing a large clump of hair on his side. The top of his head seemed to have been singed, too.

“Well, hello you,” I said. “What have you been up to?”

“Just hanging around, Master. Why, is it time to sing again?”

“Sing?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, sing,” Bumpkin repeated a little sadly. “*What Shall We do With a Drunken Sailor* and all that. The usual stuff, you know.”

“This sounds like it’s been quite a party,” I said, scratching my head trying to kick my memory into gear — but it seemed to have hoisted a white flag and refused to cooperate point blank. “You’d better tell me: was it me who did this to you?”

The goblin lowered his eyes. “It’s my own fault. I shouldn’t have talked back.”

“Shit. Sounds like I’ve been a real scumbag. Bumpkin, I’m *so* sorry. Whoever said *in vino veritas* was a lying bastard. That’s the end of it. Come on, put one of your concoctions together for me. Something to get me back to my feet. I’ve got a headache from hell. Let’s get back to sobriety.”

“Really?” the goblin asked, his voice tinged with childish hopefulness.

“Scout’s honor,” I said, raising my hand.

“Just a moment... one sec...” with another pop, Bumpkin disappeared.

So much for our heart-to-heart. The only thing I’d managed to find out was that I’d been a real pig to him.

Still hoping for him to reconsider and come back, I began scrolling through the logs in my interface.

Oh gosh. My Karma had dropped to -1480. What was that for?

You’ve hurt a Commoner who was neutral to you ... hurt a Commoner who was neutral to you... ...hurt a Commoner... hurt a Commoner...

Well, at least I hadn’t killed anyone. But still it looked like I’d managed to paint the town red, that’s for sure.

Okay. What about the abilities I’d just acquired?

Counterattack *(Speed). Allows you to deal a successful counterstrike against a superior enemy. Your current level of* ***Speed*** *allows you to use this ability no more than once per combat.*

Fortitude*: allows your body cells to reconstruct themselves while completely purging themselves of all toxins, pathogens and harmful decomposition agents. Your current level of Fortitude allows you to double your body's regeneration rate compared to a regular Player.*

Power Man *(Stamina). Allows you to fully restore Vigor once it reaches 0. Your current level of Stamina allows you to use this ability no more than once a day.*

Paralysis *(Illusions). Allows you to immobilize any creature.*

Duration: 3 seconds

In order to activate it, you need to touch the creature involved.

Cost: 250 mana points

Fog *(Illusions). Spreads an impenetrable layer of moisture vapor over an area of up to 150 ft. in diameter, rendering it invisible for other Players with the exception of the caster.*

Duration: 15 seconds

Cost: 500 mana points

Summoning the Fallen Warrior *(Sorcery). Materializes the spirit of a dead soldier. The summoned warrior will follow his or her master defending him until his summoning time expires or until he dies. Immune to physical damage.*

Duration: 3 minutes

Cost: 200 mana points.

That wasn't too shabby. It meant that I didn't even need to do anything. This new Revitalization thing could cleanse my body just nicely,

thank you. No wonder there were so many empty bottles lying around because this new ability must have identified alcohol as a toxic substance and purged my body of it before I could even get drunk.

Wasn't that just typical? Trust me to invest a lot of effort into inventing more problems for my ass, then spend an equal amount of effort into weaseling my way out of them.

The spells all seemed to be quite interesting, too. At a first glance, Paralysis seemed to be little more than a toy. Try and cast something like this while facing a well-armed enemy who's prepared for all kinds of tricks. You could, I suppose, use it on the sly like rogues like to do, but that was the extent of it.

As for the Summoning the Fallen Warrior, it really wasn't that simple, either. The way it was worded, it sounded really cool. But judging by its cost, it couldn't be as awesome as I'd first imagined. I would have to try it out and see what it does.

But as for Fog, it was definitely the most useful thing I could have possibly received. No explanation was even necessary.

A sudden screeching sound made me sit up. Someone was unabashedly fiddling with a key — or maybe not even a key — in my very own front door lock. Somehow I doubted it was the householder because he was now sitting on the kitchen stool feeling extremely unhappy with this development.

I got up as quietly as possible and reached into my inventory for the newly-appropriated dart. Whoever it was that was trying to break into my apartment, he was soon to regret his idea.

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Chapter 2

THE WORLD OF TODAY is as cruel as it has ever been. You can bump into any wound-up psycho with a gun behind the wheel of a posh SUV. A verbal exchange at a supermarket cash register can easily escalate into a fistfight with grievous bodily harm. A reckless rebuke of a group of local teenagers by your own front door can end up in a body full of lacerated wounds from a broken bottle. The only place we feel relatively secure today is in the safety of our own home, after two turns of the upper lock and one of the lower.

And even that kind of safety was only relative, as I'd just found out — because the mysterious stranger continued to pick my lock with a determination worthy of a more noble application. To add to it, he clearly wasn't alone, judging by a very unflattering commentary he earned for his tardiness.

Bastards, weren't they? They weren't even trying to hide it. Burglars had got really cheeky these days. Before they would at least stick a leaflet in your door to check if the houseowners were at home. If it stayed there after a couple of days, it meant the occupants were away and the coast was clear. But to do it in broad daylight like this, without even checking to see I had the light on in my kitchen window — that was pure impudence.

I stole into the hallway and took a better grip on the dart's wooden shaft. My hand was all sweaty with nervous tension.

I raised my hand to take a swing. Come on, then, come on in.

The door opened with a creak. The narrow strip of light underneath it began to widen. The burglars' muttering transformed into clearly audible words,

“Even a one-armed bandit would have opened it quicker.”

“Well, then you should have hired one of those, shouldn’t you? I’m not Litius, am I? My Burglary skill isn’t up to much.”

No points for me for recognizing those voices: the cack-handed Traug and the permanently bitchy Arts constantly on his case, as usual. The problem was, by then the dart had already winged its way through the few feet that separated us, sinking effortlessly into Traug’s chest.

He stared at me with silent amazement before falling back into the hallway with all the grace of an IKEA wardrobe, very nearly burying Arts in the process.

“Are you nuts?!” she flared up.

“Master, it wasn’t me,” Bumpkin materialized right under my feet, impatient to extricate himself. “It’s Miss Vasilisa. She told me she was bringing your friend around. He does look like you — and he is of the same race as you, you see. How was I supposed to know he was your enemy?”

“Quit your bullshit!” Arts flashed Bumpkin an angry glare. She leant over Traug and hurried to cast the simplest Heal. “You could have rewound time, you know.”

“I just lost the plot,” I admitted in all honesty. “You two just came out of nowhere. He’s all right, anyway.”

“Like hell I am,” Traug gasped.

He sat up and pulled the dart out of his chest. Then he pressed his hand to the wound and stared at it in surprise, as if refusing to believe there was still some blood left inside him.

“It’s only a scratch, get over it,” I said. “Stop darkening my doorstep. Come on in already.”

The opposite neighbor’s door lock clicked, letting out the smell of frying potatoes and the pounding sounds of a football being kicked around in little Boris’ room.

“Serge? What’s going on here?” Lydia asked without stepping out. She must have been peeking through the peephole at all the fun and games we’d been having.

“Sorry. Just some friends turned up.”

“Next time I’ll call the cops on you. I’m sick and tired of all your drunken shenanigans!”

“Please do,” I said before closing the door.

“Is that how you always treat your neighbors?” Arts snapped.

I was about to say something sarcastic but thought better of it. “She’s constantly on my case. Traug, quit standing there whining. And give me my dart back. Shit! The Paralysis spell is gone.”

“Well, I’m sorry!” my Korl friend blurted.

“What in hell brought you two here, anyway?”

“It was Bumpkin who called us up!” Arts replied, pulling a rolled-up bandage from her magic album. “He said that your binge was over, sort of.”

“In that case, you got here suspiciously quickly!”

“That’s because we’d been waiting upstairs,” Arts reached into her inventory for the keys and lobbed them to me.

“You mean, at...” I faltered, unable to make myself utter the name.

“If you ever touch me again,” Arts turned to Traug, “I’ll just break your arm. Come on, fix yourself up,” she shoved the bandage at him. “Yes, we were at his place. His wife is at her sister’s. As far as I understood, she’s unlikely to come back. The Guards will take care of that. They’ll clean up her memory and stuff. They couldn’t really refuse Hunter’s last request,” she added, motioning me into the room.

As soon as we got to the unfolded couch, she began relieving her inventory of all kinds of things. A rectangular box, small and glowing; a heap of day-to-day clothes; a white wax mask which looked eerily like one of my Divine Avatars in the flesh; Omega’s familiar marcasite sword...

“What’s this?” I asked.

“That’s what the Seers asked me to pass on to you,” Arts replied. “This is what Omega and Hunter dropped. And seeing as you were the one who killed them... technically, anyway... it’s your loot. All the useless commoner junk I already got rid of. And here’re the keys to Hunter’s apartment.”

“You mean that our Seer friends have humbly appropriated all the rest?”

“Well, in theory all this belonged to no one, did it? So it’s like first come, first served.”

“Of course. Why am I not surprised? They just love to sponge off other people’s spoils.”

“Oh please...”

I waved her objection away, letting her know I was in no mood to expand on the subject any further. Instead, I picked up a small handgun. It

looked quite futuristic, made of some unknown plastic. I turned it around in my hands.

Mini-size Plasma Thrower K133

Penetrates all types of physical shields with the exception of Blanket and Impermeability which comes with Destroyer's Avatar. Removes all physical shields which your opponent may have cast on him or herself, provided their class is lower than Blanket.

Damaged.

That's right! Here's the little dent in its side. I must have nicked it with my Katzbalger when I'd lopped Omega's hand off. Not a problem, anyway. I had an identical one which worked: Valfail's posthumous gift. Never mind. Next!

I picked up the rectangular box. It must be the plasma for the gun. It was clearly divided into four compartments. Meaning, I had four shots. Very similar to a regular handgun, really.

I clicked the clip in and released the safety catch. The gun powered up with a reassuring hum.

"Don't even think about letting it off here," Arts warned me.

"Oh no. I wanna save it."

I put the K133 into my inventory and turned my attention to the rest of the stuff. A regular trench coat, a pair of shoes, some pants, a mask, a knitted cardigan, a jacket, a stone...

Repelling Stone

No of Charges: 99/110

Range: 60 ft.

Duration of one charge: 1 hr.

Renders everyone within the item's range invisible to commoners

Note: when activated, the item creates an urge in all commoners not to approach within its range.

It was identical to my own. Or to be even more precise, it was its twin brother. I stashed it away in my inventory, planning to study it at a later date.

Finally, I tackled the choicest of the spoils: namely, the weapons.

Marcasite Sword of Chirnac

+10 to Short Blades skill

Removes 2 Blankets with each blow. Pierces any commoner shield with a single lunge.

I wouldn't say it was top of the range — but then again, I'd seen it kill Austerius (which was probably only thanks to Omega's fencing skills).

I flung the marcasite sword aside because I glimpsed the familiar hilt peeking from under the pile of clothes. Refusing to believe my own eyes, I gave it a little tug.

The Gramr

The defiled dark sword of the first Gatekeepers. Penetrates all known armor, protection spells or Avatars' abilities. It once used to belong to the strongest of Gatekeepers — but now the sword's spirit is broken and all it can do is wreak pain and destruction.

Yeah right. What else can a weapon possibly bring about, other than pain and destruction? Was it supposed to dish out cookies and candies? To hell with that, anyway. But — why had Hunter had to tell me that the Gramr had been destroyed? Why would he have lied to me?

I picked up the sword, feeling a smile spread over my face. The sword which could penetrate any armor, they said? Any protection spell or even an Avatar-class ability? Paired with the dark Avatars I already had, this left me with virtually no comparable opponents.

“Other than yourself,” Arts said.

“Pardon me?”

“You’ve been thinking out aloud,” she said broodily. “Normally, when people start to talk to themselves, it’s a warning sign. You haven’t even noticed the most important thing.”

I sensed anger rising in me. It took all of my strength to try to suppress it. I had to keep repeating to myself that Arts wasn’t my enemy. She wasn’t my enemy. She wasn’t...

“Which is what?” I asked.

“The letter,” she said, pointing at a thin sealed envelope. “No one’s opened it, I assure you.”

I hesitated for a while, unable to bring myself to touch the paper. In the end, I did put the sword down and reached for the envelope. It must have been partly due to Arts because I hated to show my weakness in front of her.

“I’ll go check on Traug,” she said, quick on the uptake.

I perched myself on the edge of the couch piled up with dead men’s effects. My hands trembled as I ripped the envelope open. I pulled out a

folded sheet of paper and stared at the messy, tilting lines.

Hunter's handwriting was a bit weird — childish, sort of. His letters were large and lopsided, as if he'd made an effort to write in block letters, afraid that he might be misunderstood otherwise.

Hi Serge,

I hope that everything went according to plan. In which case, it's you and not Omega who must be reading this. Whatever happened to me was none of your fault. It was entirely my choice. I knew what I was about to do and what I was doing it for. This decision had brought the long lost purpose back into my life.

But now it's irrelevant. The most important thing is, you're now facing some very difficult times. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes now. Between all the Black Avatars, your negative karma and this cursed sword which I was trying so hard to keep from you, this is enough to break anyone. Darkness is way too easy to give in to — but somehow I know you're gonna stand firm, even if it might cost you every bit of your willpower. Do not allow malice and hatred to cloud your mind. From now on, they'll be your constant companions. You need to learn to control them, submitting them to your will and extinguishing any bouts of fury. Please remember there's a lot of Light still left in you.

Try to get rid of the sword at the first opportunity. Whoever kept it for a long time, all of them ended badly. Still, there's a very big condition for you to meet. You should only give it to someone who's beyond reproach. Only they can overcome the sword's power. Under no circumstances whatsoever give it to a Gatekeeper. I trust them less and less just lately. There's something truly awful and incredible coming which has been brewing for a long time, and there's no way we can avoid it. And this is where it will come from: from the most central world of them all which is also the home world of the Gatekeepers.

Still, you mustn't forget your most important objective, which is meeting the Choruls. I was very surprised when I found out the truth about them. And I know now that they're waiting for you. Still, it's down to you to find the way to their world. I hope it's not gonna happen before you're ready. Because if it does, then my own sacrifice and those of all the others will have been in vain.

Kefal, also known as Hunter.

The last few lines, including my mentor's real name, were quickly becoming smudged by my tears which kept falling onto his letter. I just couldn't help crying. Hunter, who'd died for me and for our higher purpose. The purpose which I was now approaching in tiny baby steps, leaving but scorched earth in my wake.

My friends were quietly sitting in the kitchen. They'd unceremoniously brushed all the dead Korl's stuff onto the floor. Traug was already healed and supping my leftover beer in silence. Arts was perched on a stool like a poor relative doing nothing in particular. Bumpkin was busy picking up all the empty bottles, trying to move quietly without clinking them.

Sensing my approaching arrival, they froze like mice sensing a cat lurking behind a wall. And what was even more interesting was the alarmed look on their faces when they turned their heads to the sound of my footsteps. Did I detect fear in their gazes?

"You okay?" Arts ventured, as if abashed by her own question.

"Fine, thanks. Anyone seen my phone?"

"Here it is," Arts said, handing it to me. "You asked us to text her back whenever she wrote. So we did."

I took the phone and opened up the messenger I normally used to text Julia. Apparently, we'd never stopped messaging each other over these last

few days. None of that stupid sweet talk, just some warm, heartfelt conversations. It took me about twenty minutes to read through all the exchanges.

“So I was supposed to be on a business trip all this time?” I said, looking up at Arts in surprise. “And you kept texting to and fro in my place?”

“Well, you weren’t up to doing it yourself, were you? Had you disappeared for such a long time, that would have raised questions. So I just told her that the line was so bad I couldn’t hear anything and had to use the Internet.”

“And she believed you?”

“She did indeed. Especially because there was a certain Seer who took care of her and your parents after that dinner of yours. For the next couple of days, she didn’t’ even think about you. Neither did your parents. There was one call from your Mom which Traug took and told her he had a sore throat.”

Pursing my lips, I kept turning the phone in my hands. Considering how Arts had behaved at that fateful dinner, I dreaded to even think how she must have felt replying to Julia’s texts. And still, she hadn’t made one sarcastic jibe the whole time. I knew it because I’d read it.

I couldn’t even think of an appropriate word of appreciation. The only thing I managed to blurt out was, “Thank you.”

“Ah, get away with you,” Traug climbed back to his feet, forcing himself away from that which was the most important, namely his beer. “We’re a tribe, aren’t we?” he walked over to me and gave me a bear hug.

This pronouncement of brotherly affection made me even queasier. My head was threatening to explode like a Chinese firecracker. Still, I stayed put, unwilling to estrange myself from him.

Arts, too, reached out from behind his back to tap me on the shoulder. “Together we’re gonna make it.”

To top it all, I felt my leg being clasped by something small and exceptionally furry. Had I had a dog, I would have thought it was in need of a good siring. But as it stood, I realized it was my house goblin also professing his eternal love. Or whatever they call it.

Admittedly, it made me feel rather embarrassed — abashed even. In our family, any open show of affection was frowned upon. And this...

“Where’s Litius?” I hurried to divert their attention.

I thanked all the gods that it worked. Traug stopped accosting me. Bumpkin promptly vanished — either from embarrassment or for whatever other reason, only to materialize in my bedroom where he started rustling around putting the bed away.

Traug scratched the back of his head and said almost apologetically, “Litius said it was pointless for him to join us in babysitting you, seeing as there were two of us here already. So he said he’d rather work on our investments. We’d just received, how d’you call it...”

“The down payment for the beholder’s fat,” Arts prompted.

“Was it a lot?” I asked.

“More than I thought,” she replied.

Traug nodded. “Enough for a six-month drinking binge.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Five days,” Arts replied.

“I thought so too. Never mind. Get yourselves ready. I’m gonna clean myself up now and we’ll all go to the Community. I need to talk to someone.”

Talk about the best-laid plans. Don’t get me wrong: it only took me thirty minutes to get scrubbed up, smelling of soap and dressed in some clean clothes. Still, I must have overestimated the healing properties of water. The repercussions of a five-day drinking binge showed no intention of slacking off.

As I stood there, I was struck by a rather lofty thought. My hangover must have been the price I was paying for my earlier euphoria. Call it the Universe finding its balance, if you wish.

As we loaded ourselves into a cab, the driver was eyeing us with an understandable degree of apprehension. I knew how he must have felt. We were a motley crew. A gentle giant, a stunning young woman and a wimp reeking of alcohol. Enough to make one keep an eye on the family silver.

We’d hardly pulled away when the driver rolled his window down — apparently for fear of becoming inebriated himself. Unsurprisingly, the ever-lightly dressed Arts who was sitting directly behind the driver began to shiver. Because as you probably all know, our country only has two seasons: “the month of May” and “not the month of May”, and now was the latter. So her next comment wasn’t that surprising,

“Excuse me? Could you roll up the window, please?”

“I can’t breathe in here,” the cabbie replied.

“Didn’t you hear what she said?” I snapped, suddenly furious. “You want me to rip your head off?!”

The cabbie swung round to say something but thought better of it. My Insight had already told me his status: Boxer. I could tell he was strong and quick on the draw, someone who could easily upgrade any verbal dispute to

a full-blown punch-up. Not that I cared. I could literally feel my hand close around the hilt of the Gramr while my other hand clenched the K133. I even wished he'd go for it.

Instead, he turned away and rolled up the window.

That's right. Fear is palpable. That's why dogs can always sense who's afraid of them. But he didn't seem to have sensed it in me. His biceps had failed to impress me; his stern glare was wasted on me. The willowy wimp — as commoners must have seen me — wasn't afraid of him at all. Rather to the contrary: the dog which was about to growl at me thought it prudent to back off which its tail between its legs.

"You shouldn't have done that," Arts said under her breath.

Her words had the same effect on me as water has on red-hot steel. She was right. Hunter had been right, too. If I started throwing a fit at the drop of a hat, I would quickly lose myself to my Dark Avatars.

Plus, my plummeting Karma didn't add anything to my good humor. I dreaded to think what might happen to me after a month of a marathon like this.

"Sorry," I paused and added louder, "I'm sorry. I was out of order. It's been a hard week."

The cabbie smiled. "It's okay. Happens to everyone. D'you mind if I turn on the radio?"

"Of course not."

The remainder of our journey was spent to the thunderous sounds of some acid house, with only an occasional commercial break to relieve our ears. Or maybe it was just the state I was in, because Arts had already dosed off while Traug was busy eyeing the little Orthodox mini-icons lined up on the cabbie's dashboard.

“Thanks, man,” I said as we arrived, leaving him a more than generous tip. “Sorry again about that.”

“Thanks,” judging by his smile, he’d already forgotten the earlier upset. “Have a good evening.”

My soul wasn’t completely black yet — not black enough to believe that money could solve anything. True, you could sort out little problems with a little money. Still, the power of words was much stronger. Words like “sorry,” for instance. Who would have thought that just five letters could have such an effect? When timely said, it can save a marriage or even stop a bloodshed. The hardest part is blurting it out.

I kept pondering over it until the cab had disappeared from sight. Only then did I turn back to my friends.

They stood there patiently waiting for their light-faced black-souled friend to snap back to reality. Were they really so afraid of me — or could it be something else too?

“Let’s go,” I said, motioning to Traug.

“We’ll have to wake Litius up. He goes to bed early. According to him, his head doesn’t function if he doesn’t get enough sleep.”

“According to him, sleep deprivation strips the brain of its natural ability to perform,” Arts corrected him. “Litius has been going on about it for ages.”

“Don’t worry about it, guys,” I said. “We’re not going to Litius’s.”

“Where are we going, then?” Traug said, scratching the top of his head.

“To that old friend of yours,” I said. “We need to find out what caused that spot of rust on the mechanoid’s joint.”

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Chapter 3

SOLITUDE CAN HAVE A POWERFUL EFFECT on one's habits and character. You get used to living your own life, only taking care of your own problems. The longer it lasts, the harder it becomes to let another person in. You create your own daily schedule and develop your own little rituals which over time grow into habits which become sort of stencils if you wish, which cut off everything that doesn't belong.

Trying to squeeze yourself into the life of such a person against their will is extremely difficult. You need to carefully consider all their little quirks and preferences to ensure you don't alienate them. Unless you want to brazenly invade their space and walk all over their starched white tablecloth in your muddy boots, so to speak, in order to provoke their angry reaction — and this was the option I decided to go with.

"What if he's not at home?" Traug offered, looking quite uneasy.

I could understand him. Rumis was his friend — and I had a funny feeling that they were into something not exactly legal together. At least Rumis didn't strike me as the law-abiding type. If he saw Traug with us now, it wouldn't do their relationship any favors.

"Really, Serge," Arts said, taking his side. "It's already late. All the shops are shut. We're attracting attention."

She was right. We were the only ones still left on the empty street, not counting one of the Guards who stopped at the intersection with his arms crossed on his chest, not even trying to conceal his professional interest in our weird-looking trio. If push came to shove, how quickly could I kill him?

"I don't intend to wait till morning," I said as I knocked again.

Finally, I heard the sound of floorboards creaking behind the door, followed by the shuffling of steps. Then Rumis froze at the door as if trying to peek through it to see who’d arrived. Which was funny because the door didn’t have a peephole.

After another thirty seconds or so, the door opened.

“Traug, Arts...” he said, giving us a once-over. “And you... what do you want at this hour?”

“Just to talk,” I said. “If you could just answer a couple of questions, we’ll pay you half a kilo of dust.”

To illustrate my point, I reached into my inventory for a hefty moneybag and shook it before his nose, spreading the aroma of chocolate and cinnamon in the air.

His glazed-over eyes focused, glinting with life. Once a merchant, always a merchant. They never miss a trick. And if all it takes is answering a few questions, it’s a no-brainer.

Rumis gave the Guard a much more hostile glare than he’d just given us. Which was a good sign. I didn’t doubt for one second that he already had certain disagreements with the law. That’s why I couldn’t help smiling when he stepped aside, letting us in.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 24.

“Just make it quick, seeing as you’ve bothered to come at this late hour.”

Rumis took us to the very room on the ground floor where I’d once practiced my skills with him. At the clap of his hands, the dimmed wall lights burned brighter. What a shame, ruining such a romantic atmosphere.

The mechanoid sat at the round table I remembered from last time, with the same ancient tea urn still mounted on it. He motioned for us to join him. “I’m listening.”

“We’re searching for a certain item,” I began.

“A Seeker, searching for an item. That’s a first,” he said with a grim nod.

I realized he was struggling to suppress his irritation. No wonder. We’d broken into his house at an ungodly hour and were sitting at his table talking in riddles. He was no blushing girl in need of courting. Had it not been for our generous offer, he would have already worked us out the door without a second thought. Even his old connection with Traug — or should I say their old smuggling relationship — wouldn’t have helped us much.

“A stone,” I said. “A stone which has a set of very specific magic properties. It’s extremely difficult to handle because it can give you burns and other magical pains in the butt. It can also be used as a relic.”

“Is that it?” Rumis said with a sweeping gesture of dismay. “What does it look like? What is it called? What properties are we talking about, exactly? And what makes you think I know something about this stone that even you don’t?”

He had a point. Basically, we wanted him to go somewhere unknown to bring back something we couldn’t even describe. There was far too little to go on. Even if we had a magic search engine here, it would have come back with a blank page.

And still I sensed with a deeply ingrained certainty that we’d come to the right address.

“That spot of rust on your joint, doesn’t it bother you?” I asked on a whim, not following any particular strategy.

You’d think my question made no sense whatsoever. Still, Rumis’ eyes opened wide as if I was dangerously close to lancing the proverbial abscess. A bizarre sense of superiority rose in me because I now knew that I had the spell shop owner where I wanted him.

As if on cue, the black mask of one of my Divine Avatars materialized next to my face.

As I put it on, a shiver ran through my body. The world around me went dim, Rumis included. A miserable little Purg trying hard to hide his pathetic little secrets from me.

I held out my hand. “Tell me.”

He chuckled — in fact, he all but gave me the finger. But after a brief pause, his mouth opened on its own accord, saying all kinds of things apparently against its owner’s will.

“The way I became mechanoid... it wasn’t exactly legal. At the time, I met some very useful peopl—” he covered his treacherous mouth with his hands.

What a wuss. “Guys, d’you mind helping our friend out? He seems to have a problem with his hands. He’s about to impart some quite valuable intel but they seem to be in the way.”

Arts and Traug exchanged wary glances as if trying to divine which article of the Game’s penal code they’d be looking at if they obeyed me. Still, they didn’t have to think for very long because at that point, Rumis’ both hands dropped to the table almost in synch.

“Let’s start all over again, okay? Tell us everything from the beginning.”

“The way I became mechanoid wasn’t exactly legal. At the time, I met some very useful people who introduced me to one Letraine who was a

Manager of the Fourth Order. I could see straight away that we could do some good business together. Provided I became one of their ilk...”

“So you decided to become a mechanoid?”

Rumis nodded. “I had a certain part of me replaced... a very inconspicuous part which allowed me to remain a Purg for everybody else. A Purg who modified spells for a living. I arranged for some paperwork which granted me access to the City up to the Seventh Order. That was more than enough for my purposes.”

“So what kind of business is it?”

“Just sending some clients his way. Whoever wanted to become a mechanoid without going on the waiting list and having to deal with all the red tape.”

“Sorry, I still don’t get it,” I admitted. “What’s the point?”

“The point is, there’s no extradition agreement with Mechilos,” Arts said. “As it’s a mechanoid world, so it guarantees complete immunity to its citizens.”

“Then why can’t they do it through official channels?”

“Because no one’s gonna grant citizenship to known criminals,” Arts explained. “It’s not as if they accept all and sundry. You need to pay a lot of money and prove your clean criminal record in the neighboring worlds.”

“And I have a funny feeling you can do it quicker,” I said. “Even if the price tag is much steeper.”

“Letraine has to fight off clients with a stick,” Rumis admitted. “I handle all the customers arriving from Cesspit and Purgator. Orael takes care of all the creatures from the Central Worlds.”

“Wa-a-ait a sec,” I said. “This Letraine of yours, does he look like some sort of robotic crocodile?”

“You could say that. He’s a crocman.”

The penny dropped. “And this Orael, isn’t he an Iorolf?”

“Exactly.”

“How often do they come to see you?”

“Whenever there’s a big batch of new clients coming, and then again two days after the deal. We count the proceedings and share them out. Then we make new lists and charge the advance payments. Orael and I decide on the number of those who’re in for modifications. Then we wait for Letraine to have enough openings and give us a go-ahead.”

“But why here? Wouldn’t it be easier to meet in Purgator? Or couldn’t you just come to Mechilos yourself?”

“No way. Too many prying eyes and ears there. Ditto for Purgator and all the neighboring worlds. Cesspit is by far the safest. It’s quiet here, you see.”

“But why can’t you just forge the paperwork? What’s with this obsession to stick some hard steel into your body?”

“Because if an inspection discovers as much as a single fake, the scandal will be huge. They will order an investigation, and the whole thing will collapse. And Letraine makes too much out of it to lose his cash cow.”

“So when are they coming, those friends of ours?”

Now he did shut up for real, showing no intention of divulging any really important intel. Made sense. This was exactly what the Spilling the Beans ability was supposed to do, making your opponent open up and air

their dirty linen right in front of your nose. Rumis, too, had just shared his dirtiest secret to me. He was a flesh peddler scumbag, and this was the only reason he'd chosen to become a mechanoid himself, just to simplify things. But that didn't mean he could answer any less relevant questions.

Oh well...

"You can release him," I said, preparing to get up.

"Get the hell out of here," Rumis wheezed, gradually coming around. "And don't you ever come back!"

"Not so fast," I said as I slowly reached into my inventory.

Sword in my right hand. The plasma gun in my left. No, I wasn't completely crazy, not yet. I had no intention of killing him — in fact, I still needed him. But that didn't mean I couldn't put the fear of God into him. Or even intimidate him a bit, if you know what I mean. I needed information — and I knew that he had it.

"Serge," Arts began, alarmed.

I smiled at her. "I just wanna ask him a question."

She didn't appear too convinced.

I leapt to my feet and kicked the table out of the way. Rumis didn't have the time rewind ability — he even seemed to have problems with his own reaction times. So he simply dropped backwards, chair and all, grasping at thin air.

The tea urn clattered down to the floor. Its lid came off, sending water flying everywhere. So it wasn't just a funny prop, after all.

I walked around the wet spot on the floor, kicked the table out of the way, and stepped toward Rumis, pressing the sword blade to his throat. In

the brief time it had taken me to make those few steps, he'd already managed to cast several Blankets on himself. He was an expert Player, after all. All the more enjoyable it was to watch Gramr effortlessly slice through them all, leaving a small cut on the bastard's neck.

"Doesn't feel nice being so helpless, does it? No I'm gonna ask you again and depending on your answer we'll see what to do next. When are you gonna see Letraine next?"

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 25.

"Tomorrow. They're coming tomorrow," Rumis babbled. "Him and Orael. They're gonna give me my cut and decide on the next batch."

"So you see? Not that difficult, was it?" I said, putting the sword back. "I don't think you're gonna report us to the Guards, either. Would be stupid, wouldn't it? After everything you've just told us. So I don't think you're gonna tell your partners anything, either. You could even arrange our meeting, why not? I need to talk to them."

At this point, the still-prostrated Rumis shook his head, apparently in disagreement. I raised a surprised eyebrow and pressed the K133 to his stupid head.

"You can kill me if you want," he wheezed, "but there's no way I'm gonna lure Letraine into a trap."

He was full of surprises, wasn't he? Admittedly, I felt momentarily lost. Not because I was obliged to put my money where my mouth was. I wouldn't hesitate to kill him if he started playing the hero and telling me where to go. But this was different — and I couldn't quite work it out yet.

"Is Letraine really worth dying for?" I asked gingerly, trying to feel for any weak points.

“It’s got nothing to do with that. It’s just that if I rat on him, death would seem like the best option. You’ve no idea what this croc is like.”

“So he’s so big and terrible, is he? Never smile at a crocodile?”

In fact, I was quite relieved. Not because I approved of Letraine’s business practices — but simply because I now knew the reason for Rumis’ silence. Once a croc, always a croc.

In any case, I had no intention of pushing Rumis too far. He seemed to like money quite a lot — so we just might come to an agreement, after all.

“I have no intention of hurting either of them,” I said. “I just need to speak with them.”

“Swear you’ll only do that?”

I chuckled. He must have been really afraid of his boss to be so brazen. But it looked like this was the only way to come to an agreement.

“I swear not to harm either Letraine, Orael or yourself in any way during our meeting tomorrow.”

I’d learned my lesson with Clinger, so I worded my oath very carefully this time. Therefore, the mention of “tomorrow”. It said nothing of me potentially coming back to rip Rumis to shreds at any later date.

“You’ll come on your own,” he said. “Without these two.”

“Sounds good.”

“Very well. In that case, I want another half-kilo. For arranging your meeting.”

“Your boss isn’t the only one with the money fetish, is he?” I said, proffering him a hand.

He grabbed it and forced himself back to his feet. I put the gun away, set the table back up and poured a kilo of dust onto it: the greatest amount I’d ever have to pay for a favor.

Rumis promptly scooped it into his inventory, then held out his hand for a handshake while pressing the other hand to the cut on his throat. We shook on it, finalizing this rather bizarre deal.

“Let’s go,” I said to my friends.

Only when I was already on the doorstep did I turn around and ask the question that had puzzled me most,

“What’s with that spot of rust, anyway?”

Rumis paused, apparently pondering whether to reply. He had a point. My Spilling the Beans ability wasn’t active any longer. My sword wasn’t pointing at his throat. He had every right to play hard to get, or even refuse to answer.

Still, he spoke.

“Letraine is a tight old bastard. He skimps on everything, even for those who work for him. The implant he got me wasn’t new to begin with, and now it’s got some weird-looking spots all over it. I might have to replace it.”

“What a cheapskate,” I said, stepping out.

In fact, there was nothing wrong with the scheme itself. Implanting illegal immigrants with cheap second-hand parts, why not? They weren’t in a position to complain about it, anyway. Illegal immigrants aren’t the kinds of folk who like to attract attention to themselves. Letraine could dictate his

own terms to them — within reason, of course. As for the parts themselves, it was something virtually everyone was practicing these days. Most companies had switched from using foolproof steel parts to disposable plastic junk, for one obvious reason: the sooner it broke, the sooner you'd be obliged to replace it. Just business, nothing personal.

"It's not right, what you just did," Arts said softly.

"He'll live," I replied. "He's a businessman. He knows the fine line between profits and personal offense. He's just earned himself a kilo of dust in less than ten minutes. Okay, so I roughed him up a bit. He'll soon forget it."

"But don't you have any moral limits that could stop you from going after what you want?"

"Should I?"

"Even Dark Players have something in them which prevents them from going too far. Having a negative karma is not the same as being evil. It just means you have your own ideas about certain things. Likewise, a Light karma won't turn a Player into a saint. But you... you..." she gasped and stopped, unable to speak any further.

Traug lowered his eyes like an innocent debutante in the company of cussing sailors.

As I peered at my friends, barely capable of making out their outlines in the thickening darkness, I felt a surge of fury rolling over me. "I what? Come on, say it!"

"You're changing. It's like now that Hunter's dead, his death has released your dark side. And it's now blocking out all the light that's inside you. This isn't you. The real you isn't like this. It's like somebody else is putting words in your mouth."

“How do you know who I really am? Just because you spent five minutes at the dinner table talking to my family? Or just because we were fighting those Rachnaids together? Or maybe it’s because I saved you and covered your ass in that little scheme with your younger brother? Anyone could have done that! You’ve no idea who I really am!”

I thought I saw her eyes glint in the dull streetlight. She didn’t say anything. She just swung round and ran off.

I wanted to shout something after her — something sarcastic that would really hurt her — but I couldn’t think of anything. So I just stood there heaving, my breath misting.

Then Traug spoke.

“You know what? We can be real assholes, all of us. The difference is, some of us know it. Others don’t.”

With that, he stumbled after Arts. No handshake, not a pat on the shoulder. Didn’t even bother to wave his hand.

“You can stuff it, you morons!” I shouted at his burly back. By then, Arts had already disappeared from sight.

A figure of a Guard clad in black materialized at the other end of the street. He walked past me, completely ignoring me. Pretending he hadn’t heard a word of our exchange. Had he said something, anything at all, it might have become the final straw. But he hadn’t.

I stood there all alone in the dark. Darkness was both outside and within me.

Gradually, my anger began to subside, leaving behind charred lumps of my soul.

No. This wasn’t right. I couldn’t allow my Dark Avatars to enslave me. If I did, I’d be living from one bout of fury to the next. Hunter, in his wisdom and experience, must have known what he was doing when he’d warned me about it. I had to get a grip.

Plus, that wretched sword. Every time I took it in my hands I felt like using it. It was as if it was craving blood.

This whole thing had turned out much more complicated than I’d thought. I was now in possession of incredible power which was worth paying an equally precious price for. I was now as strong as I could ever be — but equally weak at the same time.

Hot tears streaked down my cheeks. They rolled onto my chin where they froze solid. My earlier adrenaline surge had now subsided, giving way to apathy. I stood there in the dark street of the local Community, feeling as lonely as I’d never been before in my life.

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Chapter 4

IT FEELS SO GOOD coming back home when you know someone's waiting for you. This is probably one of the reasons why people get pets in the first place. They need an illusion that someone still needs them. That someone's waiting for them. Whether they want a bowl of dog food or a scratch behind the ear is irrelevant. What's important is that you're not so lonely anymore.

Which was why the sound of a skillet sizzling in my kitchen made me sniffle. I'd been getting a bit sentimental just lately. All those mood swings hadn't done me any good. One might think I was a junkie, going from being all soft to the heights of aggression faster than a Bugatti can get to 100 mph. I had to work on this.

"Master! How are things?"

"So-so. You haven't broken anything in my absence, have you?"

"You really shouldn't. I've been staying out of trouble ever since you started drinking, you know, — and that's almost a week now. I haven't had a single increment..."

"Incident," I corrected him.

Now that's a thought. Shouldn't I get a notice board like they have at factories, marking the number of days without a single accident? For Bumpkin, a week was really a lot. Which meant that something was bound to happen soon. I didn't need an astrologer to tell me that.

"Isn't Miss Vasilisa coming?" he asked, using Arts' real name as was his habit.

“I don’t think so. She has other plans.”

“And what about that wretched Korl friend of yours, may I ask?”

“Neither.”

“Good. Because you know, did you see his feet? He just doesn’t stop pacing, to and fro, to and fro, like a horse on heat. I mean, what’s wrong with removing your muddy boots first? He’s not used to it, he says. Of course he isn’t, living like a pig in that hole of his. But shouldn’t he leave his dirty habits at home?”

“Okay, okay, cool it,” I said as I removed my own boots and hung my trench coat in the closet. “You haven’t been cooking, by any chance?”

“Not really, no, just a quick meal with whatever was at hand. A bit of cabbage soup with some chops and mash.”

I ate without much appetite. Although the new update was working, my body was taking some time to cleanse itself. My head was a bit better but overall, I wasn’t in a good state. I literally forced the soup down just to jump-start my stomach. Which must have been exactly the right thing to do to cure a hangover. It’s true what they say about appetite coming at meal times.

Once my stomach had realized that no one was going to rape it with more vodka and beer, it pressed the “on” button, demanding more food. Bumpkin’s heavenly chops melted in my mouth far too quickly. He offered me a second helping, then sat watching me with his chin in his cupped hand, while offering a running commentary on his own cooking talent.

“What I do, I add a raw egg to the mash. Mash it up good and throw in some butter, and that’s it, done.”

He kept talking away — but apprehension still lingered in his gaze. A bit like a dog struggling to recognize its owner’s smell after a long stretch.

I was never known for my tact — and all the recent developments seemed to have rid me of the necessity to beat around the bush. “Why are you staring at me like Lenin used to stare at capitalists?”

“You’re being smothered by anger, Master. You keep bottling it up inside you without letting it go until it forces its way out. It won’t take long for you to burn out like this.”

I gnashed my teeth so as not to be rude. My cheek muscles flexed in an artificial smile. “How would *you* know how I feel?”

“Because every house goblin is tied to his master by invisible bonds. The two are like close family. Same blood.”

“Whatever. So what do you suggest? Self-control exercises and all that shit?”

“Yeah right. Penting it all up is never good. Men who don’t cry end up in emergency rooms,” he jumped off his stool. “Anger should be vented. In the old days, we would go to the very thick of the forest and scream our hearts out. So that even the wolves would shit themselves.”

“If I start screaming here,” I said, finishing off the last chop, “I’ll get myself shipped to the funny farm.”

“You don’t’ really have to scream. There’re lots of other ways humans can do it, let alone Players. Wait a sec...”

He scurried around the kitchen, rattling with something in the cupboards, then dashed into the lounge, swept through my grandma’s buffet and returned with his trophies: a stack of dusty dinner plates. “Take this.”

“Oh great. Are we expecting guests to dinner? In that case, you’d better give these things a good wash. Or even better, just chuck them out. Half of them are cracked or broken, anyway.”

“Which makes them perfect for what we’re about to do,” he set the plates on the table, then handed one to me. “Take this. Now break it.”

“Meaning?”

“Just break it! Quit staring at me and just do it! Gosh, you can be stupid sometimes!”

He didn’t have to ask me a second time. It was as if I had a machine inside me, called Uncontrollable Fury, which had now started right on cue.

I flung the plate to the floor, with the belated afterthought that it must have been Granny’s prized china. It didn’t deserve this kind of treatment. Still, yours truly had already completely zoned out, losing all control of his raging body.

After the first plate went flying, it was followed by a second, a third and a fourth until the entire kitchen filled with lots of tiny sharp shards ricocheting off the fridge and the cupboards. A couple of them even hit me, grazing my skin — but the volcano of my mirth continued to vent more magma.

On the ninth plate, I called it a day. I was heaving as if I’d just run a hundred-meter sprint. The hairs on my skin stood on end. My blood was boiling with adrenaline. But strangely enough, the anger that used to rage within me was already being carried away like a twig in a mountain stream.

I froze, listening to my sensations. “How’s it possible?” I asked in surprise.

“It just is,” Bumpkin replied, picking up the pieces. “In your case, anger is like puss. You need to squeeze it out, not bottle it up.”

“Bumpkin, you old devil,” I said, giving him a big hug. “This is the solution, don’t you understand?”

“It is,” he said, taken aback by my sudden show of emotion. “But I don’t have that many plates.”

“That’s not what I mean! I just need to redirect my anger somehow. Squeeze it out, as you say. By breaking or destroying something, or...”

He gave me a wary look which promised nothing good. This is how a divisional commander looks at a larcenous warrant officer.

I decided against explaining anything to him. Because if it all worked out well, I’d be able to use both the sword and the Avatars without causing any detriment to either myself or my entourage.

I washed my face and stumbled off to unfold the couch, feeling on top of the world. My future in the Game didn’t appear that gloomy to me anymore.

The only thing that still worried me was my regular human life which was getting more complicated with every passing day. I’d just received a good-night text from Julia which had immediately undone all of Bumpkin’s good work, plunging me back into a pensive melancholy. At least I had no desire to kill anyone yet.

Gradually, Bumpkin had finished bustling around the kitchen. He’d stopped rattling the pots, slipped the leftovers into the fridge, fed the remaining bits of plates into the trash can and swept the floors. He then clambered up into his cupboard under the ceiling — where he’d made himself a bed out of my old winter clothes — and soon began to throw Zs.

I could only envy him. I just couldn’t shake off the dark thoughts about my family. What had happened to Lily shouldn’t ever repeat. It was my duty to make their lives as safe as possible.

In the end, I barely slept a wink. I may have dozed off for a couple of hours, waking up feeling broken and angry. But at least I had a plan for the

coming day.

First things first, I booted up my laptop and looked up the nearest gym which had punch bags. Bumpkin had a point. Plate-breaking could be pretty costly. But punching a bag stuffed with either sand of rubber shavings would be just the ticket.

The nearest gym — which was also apparently the poshest judging by the pictures — was on Shcherbakov Street[1]. To where it seemed I would be heading.

Much to Bumpkin's indignation, I downed two glasses of water instead of breakfast. He shook a disapproving head and demonstrably binned the pancakes he'd made. I frowned, sensing a certain displeasure with his presence rising in me.

Which meant it was time for me to go. I grabbed the pre-prepared backpack with my gym gear, called for a taxi and left.

As soon as I'd installed myself in the cab, everything started grating on my nerves: the uncomfortable seats, the strong odor of sweat and cheap cigarettes, and the dopey song about a girl who didn't love the singer which blared from the crackling side speakers.

Seeing as I couldn't vent my displeasure, I took a few deep breaths trying to soothe the surging eruption of my inner volcano. Can't say it worked brilliantly but it was better than nothing.

At which point, I realized another important thing.

Apart from venting, I also had to learn to focus, simply in order to remain human in between. This was going to be a complicated and extremely laborious process — basically, the same as any other task of self-improvement.

Surprisingly, this simple thought gave me a much-needed boost of determination.

I asked the driver to stop at the drugstore on our way where I bought two rolls of elastic bandages. I had a funny feeling I might need them.

But once I'd paid the driver and stepped out of the cab, I had a brief moment of the jitters. I'd never been to a gym before. Never been the one to frequent weights rooms or become a gym rat. Not just because I was a lazy bastard (although there was that to it, too) — but I'd always been a bit embarrassed about my puny build. How was I supposed to have known that there was a brute of a Korl hiding behind my wussy exterior? By the same token, regular commoners had no idea either.

But it wasn't even that. It's just that I'd always thought that everyone would be laughing and pointing their fingers at me. Just some understandable childish complexes. We're all scared of being humiliated and laughed at.

But that was then. Now it had only resurfaced for a split second, instantly replaced by a surging wave of fury.

What did I care about the others? Even if someone thought I looked stupid, it wouldn't change jack. What did I care about strangers and their opinions? Would they change anything in my life? Not really.

I took a better grip on my backpack and headed inside.

"Hi," the receptionist girl said with a smile.

"Hi," I said. "I'd like a one-off visit."

"Have you been with us before?"

I shook my head.

“Do you know that we have a promotion going? The first visit is free?”

I shook my head.

“Our coach could give you a one-on-one trial session...”

She was trying really hard to test the limits of my patience. It wasn’t about her, of course, but the stupid protocol she was supposed to follow. So I did my best, suffering her promotional efforts in silence, and was rewarded with a trip to their sales counter.

After another five minutes of fuming inside, I was holding their one-month membership card. Yes, that’s right: I’d let myself be talked into it. It was indeed way cheaper than paying for a single visit — but I wasn’t yet prepared to sign up for a year. My ponderings last night had left me rather doubtful of where I might end up very soon.

The brightly lit locker room with its large lockers and brand new benches had momentarily brought back the old puny Serge in me. Still, I promptly overcame my hangups and sat down at some distance from a short squad dude, putting on the air of someone who’d been around the block a few times.

Still, I entered the weights room with the insecure gait of a wuss who’d never seen the inside of a gym before. I walked unhurriedly past all the machines casting occasional glances at other members. Pumping iron was all well and good but it wouldn’t solve my problems.

After about a minute of looking around, I finally saw the punch bag section. And, joy of joys, there was no one there.

I did a bit of warmup, trying to remember whatever stretches I knew. I then wound the bandages around my hands and wrists. I make a pretty lousy job of it. Uncle Denis would probably have laughed. But that was the

best I could do. I really didn’t want to stretch a tendon or pull a muscle. Of course, Arts could always give me a quick heal but...

No! No one was going to heal me!

Because Traug had been right. I was an asshole. Or at least I behaved like one. Not that it made much difference.

I snorted and punched the bag.

As punches went, it wasn’t that impressive. Still, I sensed something akin to satisfaction. Just a whiff of it, barely noticeable.

I decided to turn it up a notch. And again! Stronger!

Like an electric kettle with just barely enough water to cover its bottom, I came to a boil almost instantly, showering the long-suffering punch bag with clumsy half-botched blows. My lack of skill was compensated by my dedication. I gave every blow my all, investing all of my overflowing fury into punches.

No wonder I couldn’t believe my eyes when finally the bag began to swing like a sack of rags, then came back at me, very nearly knocking me off my feet.

My mana bar had shrunk a notch. After a short while, I was showered with system messages:

You’ve created the Combat Blow spell!

Your Creation skill has increased to level 1.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 11.

I zoned out for a second. This was something new. What kind of spell was that?

Combat Blow (Destruction) allows you to deal extra damage with any blow regardless of its nature. Requires tactile contact to activate.

Cost: 10 mana points

Yeah right. Just a toy, a little less than useless in a serious scuffle. It was the sheer fact of it: I'd just created a spell! Until now, all I could create had been more problems.

I shook my head, getting back into focus. Enough lounging around.

I didn't need any more motivation. It felt like it was me standing there in place of the punch bag: a dark, angry shape which had to be killed.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 3.

Only now did I notice that my Vigor had shrunk far past zero and was flashing deep in the red. Sweat poured into my eyes; I wished I'd thought of bringing a small towel with me. Both my arms and legs were vibrating with exertion. I leaned on my knees doing my best not to collapse as I tried to calm my breathing.

"You sure you wanna kill yourself on your first day?"

The voice belonged to a typical jock if ever I'd seen one. Slim waist, broad shoulders and the latest in haircut with short sides and a sleek parting. The rest was muscle. He gave a new literal meaning to the word "musclebound". He had muscles in places I didn't even know existed. The only body part he seemed to have neglected were his ears, and that's only because there're no muscles there worth mentioning.

"Thanks," I said. "I can take care of myself."

"Up to you," he said with a nonchalant ease.

I went on pummeling the bag, then paused momentarily, realizing what had just happened. Someone had just poked their nose into my affairs uninvited — but I hadn’t lost my cool.

I focused, listening to how I felt. Not a sign of anger. I was tired, sure, but my head was remarkably clear.

After another twenty minutes of pottering about, I received my hard-earned level 12 in Hand-to-Hand Fighting and staggered toward the showers. I couldn’t describe how I felt. On one hand, I reminded myself of a well-tenderized steak, as if it had been me receiving the punches. But on the other, I was remarkably calm and confident. Which was good news.

I even tried to put on Destroyer’s Avatar, simply by way of experiment. The world around me dimmed a little, but that was the extent of its negative effects.

I soaked in the shower long and hard, all the while replaying the thoughts that hadn’t let me sleep the night before. For better or for worse, I was now a weapon to be reckoned with — despite my lack of experience, my humble levels, etc., etc. I wouldn’t exactly call myself unkillable — on the contrary, all the Avatars I’d amassed were bound to attract freeloaders. Having said that, I could always delete them from my interface.

The sheer thought made me shudder. This, in fact, could be the solution. Or... How were you even supposed to revert to being a nobody once you’d gotten a taste of this kind of power and control? Okay, not exactly nobody, just a regular Player. No innuendo from Dark Avatars then — but still I might find it twice as hard to go back to my old routine.

In any case, I managed to come to a decision — and it was probably the right one, however painful it might be.

I took my time changing back into my street clothes, as if trying to put off the inevitable: something that had already fully formed in my head

and was only waiting to emerge. Logic kept telling me that I had to do it — while my very being was trying to resist.

Still, it was now as good as done.

I barely acknowledged the receptionist's mechanical "Have a nice day!" even though the poor girl was doing her best to imbue it with feeling. I dialed a cab and hurried to get in the moment it had arrived. My skin erupted in goosebumps; my knees shook; my heart was now pumping harder than during my gym session. I was about to decide my own fate once and for all.

I got out of the cab and stood motionless for a while staring at the high-rise apartment block, plucking up my courage. This was much worse than fighting the Darkest One or even fending off the Rachnaids. If I had a choice, I'd have much rather gone through another bunch of Kabirids and their infernal hounds.

But unfortunately, I was about to live through something much worse.

No idea how long I'd stood there — until finally, I realized my ears were tingling with the subzero cold, signaling me that my body was about to freeze. I walked over to the entry phone and dialed the apartment number, then gave my name. My hand shook as I opened the front door.

Ignoring the elevator, I took the stairs, hoping to organize my thoughts. Before I'd even reached the right floor, I heard a lock click open. A door creaked. I was expected.

Julie stood in the doorway in an oversize check shirt which reached slightly below her awesome buttocks. She looked so happy and cozy, with no inkling of the terrible news I was about to spill.

She threw her arms around my neck and buried her face in my chest. "Finally you're back. I missed you. Come in now. There's no one home."

Her eyes sparkled with promise. She was so close, so sweet, that my voice broke. “Jul...”

“What? Come on, say it! Cat got your tongue?” she said, still smiling.

I cast down my eyes and said what I hated saying the most,

“We should stop seeing each other.”

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Chapter 5

ALL TOO OFTEN, we feel obliged to make decisions against our own best judgment. We might do a lot of overtime, sacrificing our family time to an illusory promotion. We study bizarre disciplines just to keep our parents happy, then spend several years of our lifetime staying in the jobs we hate.

Or we part ways with our loved ones to keep them out of trouble.

The latter is probably also the rarest. You need to really want them to be happy to do something like that. Normally, we just continue to tread through the daily grind, even if the relationship is about to give up the ghost. Because:

“I just can’t be without him/her” — check;

“He/she belongs to me” — check;

“We’ve been together for ages” — check.

It takes a truly generous heart to set one’s love free.

At least that’s what I kept telling myself. Not that it helped. Julie would never be safe with me. The best thing I could do for her was let her get on with her commoner life.

I knew it wasn’t going to be easy for her. She was probably thinking I was a jerk. But it might get better over time. At least I really wanted to believe it.

You couldn’t make it up, really. An evil overlord guided by concerns for another person’s happiness. What kind of joke was that? Still, I wasn’t

in the mood for laughing, quite the opposite.

Was I angry? Not really. My cheek was still burning from the slap she'd given me. The wind chilled my body under my unbuttoned trench coat. The oncoming traffic tooted their horns at the idiot staggering along the curb — namely, myself. And still I wasn't angry.

I felt like I was at the center of a bitter, destructive void. I was dying to run back and apologize to her; to say all this had been a bad joke. I could come up with something. I was good at lying.

But instead, I kept putting more distance between her house and myself.

I'd crossed the proverbial Rubicon. I harbored no false hope. The commoner Serge Demidov was gradually dissolved within the Player of the same name. Which was probably for the best. To lose myself in the mass of commoners, marrying a regular woman and watching her grow old just wasn't meant to happen. The gears of fate had already been brought into motion, and all I had to do was watch where they might take me.

By the time I got home, I'd already calmed down somewhat. I even tried to think of other things, with lamentable results. I still had this meeting with that Manager of — which Order was it? I couldn't remember. Never mind.

I ate mechanically, unable to appreciate the food's taste, then collapsed onto the couch. My life may have just been fractured — but at least Julia was relatively safe now.

In the knowledge of which, I finally fell asleep.

My awakening came as a shock, as if someone had snapped me out of my slumber. I sat up, trying to focus, as I stared befuddledly in the window at the pitch-black night.

I groped for my phone and checked the time. 5 p.m. I wasn't thinking about Julie any longer, nor about what I'd done to her earlier. I was too worried about the upcoming meeting. I couldn't afford to be late.

I splashed some water on my face, pulled some clothes on and dialed a cab. Then I checked my stocks of dust. I needed to know what funds I had at my disposal. My friends — or maybe my ex-friends, I wasn't quite sure anymore — had been saying something about me topping up my bank account.

According to the map I'd received, we had a Trade Route Bank branch in town. Unfortunately, it wasn't in the Community but quite a long way away. Shame I didn't have the time to check it out. I'd loved to have known how much my account had accrued for the beholder's fat.

Casting anxious glances at my phone, I dashed through the Community gates, then darted down the main street toward Rumis' house, only to breathe a sigh of relief. He was there, smoking his pipe on the porch. On seeing me, he shook his head and pointed at his watch with a helpless gesture as if saying, *it's not my fault the top brass are late*.

So I headed for the Syndicate with a lighter heart. I took a seat by the billboard and looked around the bar, searching for a suitable candidate for my plan. My Insight and Observation Skills helped a lot.

After a brief while, I saw just the person I needed. My Observation Skills zoomed in on him. A wussy teenager with a disheveled mop of hair was fidgeting nervously at his table, casting wary glances at other Players and feeling badly out of place. His development branch was called Noctovisor. I had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

I watched him for a couple of minutes, then walked over to his table and sat next to him.

"Don't look so scared," I said. "I'm not going to smash your face in. When were you initiated?"

“The day before yesterday, Sir,” he blurted out. “And you are...?”

“I’m Serge,” I said, proffering my hand.

“I’m Alex,” he said, shaking it warily.

“What’s Noctovisor?”

“Something to do with being able to see in the dark. I didn’t get the chance to work it out yet.”

“So now, Alex, I want you to listen, and I want you to listen well. Never give your real name to strangers. Never tell anyone anything about your spells, abilities, development branches and especially not about any Divine Avatars you might have.”

“Divine Avatars, Sir?”

“You might still hear this word around if you’re unlucky.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because I feel like doing my good deed for the day. I wasn’t so generous when I woke up this morning, but I’m a bit better now. I also have a business proposition to make. Nothing difficult, but it might be well worth your while.”

Alex tensed, as if half-expecting me to start grooming him for illegal sex. Or maybe he just had a yellow streak in him. Then again, this wasn’t such a bad quality in a Player.

“Do you know what this is?” I asked, pouring a small fistful of dust on the table in front of him.

“Yes, Sir.”

“You can keep it.”

“Thanks.”

I all but rolled my eyes. Didn’t he know that the only free cheese was in the mousetrap? Or maybe he was just a bit simple, I couldn’t yet tell. “Aren’t you going to ask me why I’m so generous with you?”

“I suppose you must have your reasons to do so, Sir?”

“Good boy! Very smart,” I said, suppressing a smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not a member of the New Players’ Relief Fund committee. I don’t do charity. I’d like you to do me a little favor. I’ll pay you a hundred grams.”

“For doing what?” he said, his voice filled with equal doses of fear and curiosity.

“I need someone to keep an eye on a house out there. I’m expecting my friends for a visit but I don’t want them to see me. When they arrive, just come back here, report, and I’ll pay you. Simple, isn’t it?”

“You promise you’ll do it?”

I all but slapped my forehead. This Alex wasn’t going to last for very long, I could see that. Even in his old commoner days, he must have been a scammer’s dream: a rare dodo bird refusing to become extinct.

The old Serge would have started yelling at him for not asking the right questions, telling him he shouldn’t be so gullible. What kind of house did I want him to watch? Why? Wouldn’t he get a visit from the Guards at the dead of night to put him behind bars for complicity?

He asked me none of these questions.

Oh well. I had no intention of babysitting the fool. I just nodded. “I promise.”

This wasn’t an official oath — but even though there was no glowing aura enveloping me, Alex visibly relaxed. He’d barely listened to my brief instructions, too impatient to dart off.

“When do you want me to start?” he asked, meticulously scooping up his advance payment. Only ten grams, not much.

“Right now,” I said. “But if you try to shirk or run off with the money...” I half-drew the Gramr from its scabbard.

As soon as he saw its hilt, he turned rather restless. He nodded a goodbye and hopped it out of the Syndicate.

Talk about too stupid to live. Doubtful he’d be around for much longer. I probably should have straightened him out. But then he wouldn’t have agreed to do what I wanted him to. Besides, I wasn’t into mentoring. Survival is a personal thing. Like the idiots who go ice-hole fishing in springtime and get stranded when the ice melts, forcing whole crowds of volunteers to save their asses.

How strange. Even though I was perfectly relaxed now, my thoughts remained bitter and angry. What used to be a touch of irony had now developed into full-blown sarcasm. The tiniest jibe had now become the harsh criticism; an innocent question had transformed into a threat. At the moment, I had no idea what to do about it.

I bought myself a beer — not because I was thirsty but simply not to attract too much attention to myself — and returned to my table in front of the billboard, studying the missions. You could glean quite a lot from them. After perusing a whole bunch of notes, I finally focused on a few that appeared the most interesting.

Volunteers

Mission from the Order of Master Builders

The required level of the restored Building: 40

Location: Nizhny Novgorod

Reward: 250 grams of dust per day

New Recruits

Mission from the Order of Guards

Requirements: joining the Order of Guards

Rewards: 50 grams of dust for completing the interview

350 grams of dust for being accepted

***Slayer** (also known as the Red Horseman)*

Development branch: Nimbler.

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: the killing of great numbers of both Players and commoners

Sentence: death

Location: Russia

Reward: 8 kilos of dust

So, what did we have here? We had an Order of Master Builders, apparently tasked with the restoration of my home city. Somehow I didn’t

think it had anything to do with that ill-fated building. The battle between the Horsemen's henchmen on one side and the city guards and Seers on the other must have elevated into a true bloodbath. I couldn't really tell because I'd made sure I hadn't watched any TV nor even tried to find out what had really happened in the Avtozavodsky City District. The TV news would have lied, anyway — and I had no wish to once again see the ruins where hundreds of people had met their death, commoners and Players alike.

Talking about which, the mission from the Guards was a clear indication that their ranks had dwindled. Come and join us, yeah right. No strings attached. A buck to join, two bucks to leave. Having said that, they were even prepared to pay for interviewing you. Apparently, you had the right to refuse once you'd heard their requirements. A real humane bunch they were.

And, as the proverbial cherry on the cake, the mission to find the escaped Slayer. I still had no idea how he'd managed to slip past the Seers who'd formed a security perimeter around me and the Horsemen. Either there was something I didn't know about Slayer, or Banneret Arthan wasn't the only mole in their infamous Order. Then again, you shouldn't disregard the fact that the Seers could have been playing their own little game. The important thing was, Slayer could now be absolutely anywhere.

Still, I was dead sure that we'd meet again. A Player's gut feeling is rarely wrong. And now that I had Intuition, I could even use it as collateral for bank loans.

I'd killed three Horsemen out of the four. Even if I hadn't bothered to look for him, he'd find me in the end anyway. He'd wait for the right moment and just kill me.

For that reason, I reached for the billboard and tore off the mission sheet for Slayer.

By the time Alex came back, I'd gotten pretty bored. The few snippets of other Players' conversations didn't tell me anything new. Apart

from that, there wasn't much going on in the Syndicate. I had no intention of going outside and freezing my balls off, either. I may have been a half-blood Korl but exposure is never a good thing — as Jack Dawson had found the hard way on board the Titanic.

Which explains why I was more than happy to see Alex back, frozen to the bone but quite excited — which seemed to be his permanent state.

"They've arrived. Six people in total. Actually, they're not exactly people. One of them is a crocodile in knight's armor..."

"A crocman," I corrected him. "And that's not armor, either. He's a mechanoid. It's his own body."

"Okay. He's with a tall guy, he's real cute," Alex cut himself short, unsure if I could relate to his appreciation of male beauty.

"And what about the other four?" I asked, changing the subject.

He told me everything in detail. This Noctovision wasn't such a bad development branch, after all. Alex used it like night-vision binoculars which allowed him to see in the dead of the night. If you threw Insight into the mix, he'd be priceless.

"Take this," I said, lobbing him the hundred grams I'd promised him. "You've earned it."

He beamed like a polished apple. That was a lot of money to earn for an hour's work. He was probably celebrating his bit of luck and making plans for more of the same in the future. I didn't bother to tell him that he might not come across another philanthropist for quite a while. That was none of my business.

Outside, it was fresh and quiet. The sky was remarkably clear. The streets were deserted as all of the Community dwellers and their visitors

had taken cover from the cold in their homes. The frosty air singed your throat, so thick and gooey you could eat it by the spoonful.

I wasn't in a hurry, for two reasons. Firstly, I still had to decide on the tactic to adopt. Should I be forward and brazen with them — or should I keep my cool like a trader with a business proposition to make?

And secondly, I had to give them enough time to discuss my humble self. That way I could arrive at precisely the right moment, riding my white stallion and holding a red rose for easier recognition.

I turned off the street toward Rumis' house. Much to my satisfaction, two mechanoids were already posted at the door. Nothing too special — just your average nuts and bolts, if you know what I mean. One of them was a Korl; I could see his steely (or some other metal, maybe) arm peeking out of his winter jacket sleeve. The other one was human, his posture rather unnatural with his entire body weight leaning backward. He reminded me of a surprised grasshopper rearing up. According to my Insight, their respective development branches were Warhammerer and Floater.

"Hi guys," I said, nodding to them. "Enjoying the weather? I'm Serge. Rumis should have told you about me."

I half-expected them to check me. Okay, maybe not make me walk through a metal detector gate but at least do something. Still, the Warhammerer — who must have been the one in charge here — demonstratively took a small step aside, pointing at the door. I managed to glimpse a shadow of disdain cross his face. He reminded me of a Korean cook coercing a dog into his cage.

Never mind. My Impermeability' was about to kick back in soon, anyway. And I still had my sword and my plasma gun on me. So I just nodded, mirroring his smirk, as I walked in.

They expected me. That little was clear. Letraine, Orael and Rumis were sitting around the same old table minus the wretched tea urn (Rumis

must have finally put it away).

Their chairs were turned so that all there were facing me. Two more human mechanoids hovered behind their backs. I ignored them entirely, focusing on the central characters of this show.

On close scrutiny, Letraine turned out to be a real rust bucket. Even his croc's jaws glistened with steely inserts. As for his body, I won't even start. He was like a dude who couldn't stop with just one tattoo, the only difference being he was covered in steel rather than ink. This guy shouldn't get anywhere near a scrap yard magnet. In contrast, the name of his development branch almost made me cry: ***Peacekeeper.***

Orael was as different from his boss as a handsome man of flesh and blood differs from a can of crocodile meat. He was apparently a ***Tangler***. He stood motionless, his arms concealed in the long baggy sleeves of his flowing robes.

I paused open-mouthed, taking in his long hair, sharp cheek bones and large mouth, before I realized I was embarrassing myself. He only smiled back, answering my flabbergasted stare. He must have been used to these kinds of reactions.

"This hu-u-uman is the Pla-a-ayer you were talking abo-o-out?" the croc asked Rumis, not bothering to acknowledge my presence.

The hissing sound of his voice brought me back to reality. It reminded me of a car tire being deflated. I immediately realized that our conversation had got off on the wrong foot. Or to put it plainly, it had finished before it had even started.

I reached into my inventory, prepared to whip out my trump cards. Still, this seemed to be exactly what Letraine was waiting for. He threw his fist in the air. On cue, Orael's arms shot out in front of him. One of them was metallic too. Yet another mechanoid.

Gossamer spider threads entangled me. They screeched as they grew taut, binding me hand and foot.

Very well. Let’s see whose Kung Fu was the strongest.

[∞]

“This hu-u-uman...”

Before he could even finish, I whipped out the Gramr and went for them. Still, I didn’t make it. Halfway to the table I hit an invisible wall, sticky and bouncy but very strong. The more I struggled to free myself, the more I entangled myself in the giant cobweb which grew ever more visible with every thrust I made. Another trap!

[∞]

At this point, I forgot all about my supposed “power and invincibility”. There’re moments when you need to stuff your pride where the sun don’t shine. Better to lose face than the very ability to have a face to begin with.

So I just darted back to the exit — but the moment my hand touched the door handle, it got caught in the same sticky substance. Damned spider! His cobwebs were everywhere!

[∞]

I had two attempts left. I could neither escape nor use my sword.

Very well. Let’s see how you’re gonna like a proper weapon from one of those hi tech central worlds.

My loaded K133 seemed to have waited its whole life for this occasion. The impact was probably heard at the other end of the Community. The window panes shuddered; the floor heaved. The spidery

wall caught fire and collapsed. Orael clasped his head. Aha — he must have been connected to it somehow.

I squeezed the trigger again but nothing happened. The gun screamed like a nose-diving airplane but didn't fire. A cooldown.

Very well. Lesson learned.

[∞]

The gunshot made Letraine shut up. Orael predictably clasped at his head. I drew the sword and went for them.

Nothing could stop the blind fury rising from the depths of my darkening soul. Nothing could stop the Gramr, about to fall on his head!

Or so I thought — right until the moment when someone simply switched me off.

The familiar hissing voice echoed through my head,

"Sle-e-e-ep..."

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Chapter 6

YOU SHOULD ALWAYS BE ABLE to see the fine line between confidence and conceit. The former is a rather useful trait the absence of which might prevent you from achieving any really serious goals. But the latter is nothing but trouble. It prevents you from being able to see the world for what it is, with all of its problems and potential dangers. Which can become life-threatening.

Unfortunately, some dumber individuals can only learn from their own mistakes. Me being a prime example. Once I'd killed a couple of Horsemen and one demented demigod, my admittedly puny brain had apparently become unable to weigh up any potential danger. Really, one against six, what's there to be afraid of? They should be afraid of *me*, shouldn't they? Wasn't I just awesome? I could rewind time, couldn't I?

What an idiot.

Still, this wasn't the right moment to beat myself up — because apparently, something was going on here.

Letraine's happy hissing was drowned out by the stomping of boots. I heard a few booming blows which sounded suspiciously like explosions. Someone dropped to the floor close by.

Then I came round.

Until then, I seemed to be groping in the dark while hearing everything that was going on around me. And then, all of a sudden, this effect just stopped dead.

Unwilling to appear like some damsel in distress, I jumped to my feet, still not sure which of my two weapons would work better in this situation. Should I gun them all down with my K133 — or should I hack them to bits with the Gramr?

This moment of hesitation allowed me to take in the situation.

Orael was still rubbing his temples. We weren't so strong after all, were we? This artist's soul was too sensitive to survive such barbaric handling of his cobwebs.

Rumis kept blinking in fear. His non-combat development branch wasn't of much help here.

Letraine just glared furiously behind my shoulder. His two bodyguards were lying at my feet groaning.

What the hell had just happened here? Can't a man close his eyes for a moment?

I turned my head — and fell speechless.

Arts was lying on the floor in her combat gear, staff in hand. Traug was down on one knee next to her, clad in full armor.

So this was the reason I'd come round. Letraine had simply switched his attention from me to my friends.

"Stop your tricks, or I'll fire," I said, raising the gun.

The croc spitefully snapped his jaws as he shifted his gaze to me. No lights or special effects this time. He just looked at me. I locked his gaze with mine while Traug helped Arts to her feet.

"What do you think you two are doing here?" I said.

“Just decided to save one conceited idiot’s ass,” Arts replied.

“That’s right,” Traug agreed. “It was her idea.”

I was about to say that I hadn’t asked them to interfere, but bit my tongue just in time. Had it not been for my friends, I might have been now undergoing a lobotomy on the kitchen table. Or some other unpleasant bit of surgery.

“Thanks,” I said. “And as for you, Mister Croc, I only dropped by for a chat. Why did you have to start all this shit?”

“You ca-a-a-me here. You threatened my Pu-u-u-urg. I don’t kno-o-ow you, human. I don’t trust you... I never deal with those I don’t tru-u-u-ust.”

“Then it’s a lose-lose situation, I’m afraid,” I said, putting away the gun and walking over to the table. I laid my hand on the back of the chair occupied by Rumis — who hurried to vacate it, — and sat opposite Letraine. “Which is a shame because I’d love to have a chat with you.”

“You can forget it, hu-u-uman. I don’t trust you.”

“Is your record stuck? D’you know any other words? I need some information. About the stone. And I’m quite prepared to pay good money for it.”

Orael leaned toward Letraine and whispered something in his ear, smiling.

Now why did it sent my alarm bells ringing? They couldn’t be up to any dirty tricks, could they?

Letraine listened to him frowning, then bared a jawful of teeth. This must have been his way of smiling, too. “I wi-i-i-ill tell you about the sto-o-o-ne.”

“What, just like that?”

“I don’t thi-i-ink so. How much did you pay Rumis, a kilo? I want two-o-o-o.”

“Only half of that money was for the information. The rest was for arranging this meeting.”

“And still I want two-o-o. Upfront.”

Why, oh why didn’t I like this grinning croc’s head so much? It wasn’t even about the money. According to my inventory, I still had 2 kilos and 29 grams left. Besides, once money stops becoming a problem you don’t really care how much something costs.

Still, I had this nagging feeling that somebody was trying to take me for a ride. And the worst thing was, I just couldn’t work out what their trick was.

So I was obliged to shell out.

“Now tell me,” I said.

Letraine wasn’t in a hurry. He meticulously scooped up the dust and snapped his jaws with pleasure. “The sto-o-one which has magic properties. Which can’t be touched with one’s bare ha-a-ands. Which can be u-u-used as a relic...”

“Just spit it out, will ya?”

“It’s ca-a-a-alled Fa-a-arhall...”

“Farhall,” Orael echoed his boss’ hissing ramblings.

“Yessss,” the croc tipped his jaws in agreement. “Fa-a-a-arhall. The color of my pe-e-eople...”

“Green,” Orael explained.

“You need glo-o-oves to handle it... An o-o-old artifact, encased in the staff of the Manager of the Fi-i-irst O-o-order...”

“So where am I supposed to find him?”

“Orael, tell him. I’m ti-i-ired of ta-a-a-lking...”

“His name is Cartos the Fair-Eyed,” Orael explained. “He’s the Manager of the First Order, elected by all the other Managers. The staff is one of his symbols of power. It’s known as the Staff of Our Forefathers who were in fact the first modified beings on Mechilos. The artifact topping the staff indeed appears to be a stone. It’s known as Farhall — but I’m afraid I can’t tell you much about its magic properties.”

“Neither can I...” Letraine added.

Right, so what was the catch? They seemed to have told me everything they knew without keeping anything back. Now I knew that the stone was in possession of a certain Manager of the First Order. All I had to do was go there and take it — or ask him very nicely to give it to me.

So why did I have such a bad feeling about Orael’s saccharine smile? Even Rumis had managed to crack a very unsavory grin.

“So now you’re probably thinking how best to go and get it?” Orael asked sarcastically.

“Stupid hu-u-uman...” Letraine hissed his agreement. “He thinks he can ste-e-e-al Fa-a-a-arhall...”

“Only you can’t do that,” Orael leaned languidly back in his chair. The pain in his temples seemed to have all but gone. “Even if you had a human team three times as big as those two. Non-mechanoids are limited to the Tenth Order in their movements, I’m afraid.”

“And the higher the Order, the higher your mechanoid rank should be,” Rumis added.

“That’s why you need some very influential supporters in Mechilos, otherwise you won’t be able to get anywhere near the stone, let alone try and steal it,” Orael crossed his arms on his chest looking as pleased as Punch.

“Do you imply that I might need, say, a Manager of the Fourth Order to assist me in my endeavor?”

“This human is slightly sma-a-arter than I tho-o-o-ught,” Letraine said with a satisfied nod.

“It’s true that you might need someone from up there,” Orael pointed a finger to the ceiling.

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much do you want for your services?”

Those guys were something, I tell you. Their earlier grinning was enough to drive a man mad. And now that they’d heard my question, they just looked at each other and burst out laughing. The good-mannered Orael giggled, covering his mouth with his dainty hand. Letraine was snapping his jaws with laughter. Even Rumis cracked a fawning smile as he stood slightly aside watching his partners.

“Who told you I might want to help you, hu-u-uman? You’re nobody. I’ve never se-e-en you before.”

“And if I ask you really nicely?” I said, sweeping my sword through the air right in front of his jaws.

At this point, Orael got serious. “Oh please. Leave these children’s threats for the new initiates. Or did you really think you could scare us into doing what you want us to do?”

“Ridiculoussss,” Letraine agreed.

“I can pay you well. Money isn’t a problem,” I said, investing all of my Eloquence into the last phrase.

Well, what would you want me to do? I had to change my plans, seeing as my earlier muscle-flexing hadn’t garnered the results I needed.

“Oh please,” Orael said. “Leave these cheap tricks for commoners, they might appreciate them.”

“In that case, what do you want?”

Orael leaned toward his boss and rapid-fired a couple of whispered phrases into his ear. Letraine beamed, nodding, not even trying to conceal his triumph. Then he snapped his jaws just once. “Tell him.”

Orael rubbed the bridge of his nose like someone does when removing an uncomfortable pair of glasses. Then he called Rumis and did a quick sign show, pointing his finger first at me, then at his head, then making a sweeping gesture around the room.

“It’s easier to show than to explain,” he told me.

“Yeah right. Easier to make mincemeat out of us, is that it?”

“No point,” Orael said calmly. “We had no intention of killing you in the first place. Scare you a little, maybe. And seeing as we seem to have found some common ground, this thing might mean some good money for all of us. I’ll join you in the circle, don’t worry.”

Call me an idiot but I believed him. He spoke in a cool voice without exchanging meaningful glances with his green-scaled boss. Besides, my gut feeling was silent.

Plus, Orael added one last rather hefty argument,

“If you don’t feel like it, we’ll just call it a day. Nothing gained, nothing lost.”

“Okay. Wait a sec.”

I handed the Gramr to Traug. The plasma gun I gave to Arts, adding under my voice so that no one else could hear me,

“Listen, I’m, er, I’m sorry. I was out of line.”

“Don’t you think this isn’t the right moment for this apology shit?” she asked, annoyed. “Just forget it. I’ll think you had a bad case of PMS. Listen you, green scaly monster! If you look at me like this ever again, it’ll be the last thing you see!”

To my surprise, Letraine promptly averted his head.

“If things get out of control, just shoot it, don’t think twice,” I gave her one last parting bit of advice. “Okay, where’s that Rumis of yours?”

All three of us stepped into a small semicircle. This began to remind me of either a really cheap orgy or a very lazy ritual.

As if on cue, Rumis and Orael joined hands and proffered their free hands to me.

“What’s this got to do with the Spell Modifier branch?” I asked, trying to delay the inevitable.

“Nothing really,” Orael replied. “The ability to recreate pseudo reality comes with Rumis’ other specialization, which is Projector. It’s extremely rare and, if the truth were known, not exactly useful. But thanks to that, Rumis can recreate any place he's ever seen, which he’s about to do right now. I’ll do all the explaining. It’s very simple. Come on, Serge.”

I cast one last look behind, took in the bodyguards’ unconscious bodies on the floor and blew a quick breath, grabbing their hands.

Bang!

The light went out for a moment. When it came back on, the setting was completely different.

We were standing atop a cliff overgrown with moss. Mist swirled underfoot, giving me the impression that we were perched on a chunk of rock hovering in mid-air. Still, the fog didn’t rise any further, which felt weird.

In front of us, other rocks rose from the mist like levitating islets. Some of them were located higher than ours, allowing me to see their powerful foundations sinking deep into the fog. If I stumbled and fell now, how long would it take me before I hit the ground?

All the “islets” were interlinked with identical moss-covered rocky bridges, as if someone had built them on purpose. On closer inspection, I realized this was some sort of makeshift road, starting inside a far-off cliff and going all the way across the “islets”, then disappearing into the mist below.

Still, I wasn’t sure I liked the place. It was definitely daytime, seeing as I’d managed to study everything in detail. But by the same token, the sky

was shrouded with an impenetrable gray haze; the fog swirled around my legs like a living thing, making the idea of “top” and “bottom” rather undefined. If I turned the landscape upside down, hardly anything would have changed at all.

“Not a nice place, is it?” Orael asked, materializing next to me.

“That’s an understatement. What are we doing here?”

“You wait a little. You’ll find out soon enough. Our friend won’t be long.”

He was damn right there. In less than a minute I saw a catman. Or a panther-man, if you wish: muscular and agile, with a gorgeous set of bristling whiskers.

The panther-man crossed the first bridge with effortless ease, reached an islet, covered the distance to the next one in a few powerful leaps, then moved over to the next one where he stopped and looked back to check on his pursuers who’d only just emerged. He then reached into his inventory, producing a small item wrapped in a piece of cloth. He looked at it as if in disbelief at his own luck, then put it away and resumed his swift escape.

In the meantime, I studied his pursuers. Three of them looked familiar. The first one was definitely Letraine, negotiating the narrow bridges with the speed and agility remarkable in someone of his weight. Only this version of Letraine differed quite a lot from the one I knew. Where my reluctant croc friend resembled a custom version of Robocop, this was more of a regular beastman, his mechanical leg and a sheet of steel riveted to his chest the only signs of his Mechilos provenance.

The second one was one of the two guards whom I’d encountered on the street outside of Rubis’ house. This one hadn’t changed one bit, earning only a fleeting glance from me.

The third one was Rumis himself. He looked younger than now — and judging by the fact that he trailed in the rear, struggling to keep up, he also had the least stamina.

“Rumis, keep it going.”

I startled, realizing that I’d just been watching one of Rumis’ own memories.

The scene disappeared, replaced by another. I waved my hands in the air trying to keep my balance, then crouched, struggling to overcome my fear.

“Are you afraid of heights?” Orael asked mockingly.

“I am now.”

No wonder: we were now suspended in the air a good two hundred feet above the bridge road, staring down at the sharp tops of the canyon wedged between precipitous cliffs. Surprisingly, the panther-man’s pursuers had already almost caught up with him, with Rumis lagging a good thirty feet behind the others.

“Look,” Orael said, pointing forward.

From my elevated vantage point, I could now see much more than just the bridge-road meandering across the canyon. There was also a stone garden crowded with pillars which formed a plethora of complex little passages many of which ended in blind alleys. The size of it was incredible, even though I couldn’t take in the entire expanse of it, consumed by the dark.

“A maze?” I asked.

“Sort of. Not the healthiest of places, to tell you the truth. Best to be avoided. That’s why it hasn’t been studied properly yet. Rumis managed to

recreate only a fraction of it, and not even in great detail. Look over there.”

The panther-man’s pursuers were now running in a long file, steadily closing in on their quarry. Or rather, it was Letraine who kept getting close, to the point where he loosed off a few slugs from some sort of magic firearm. Still, the panther-man kept dodging the bullets.

Sorry, man. You might be agile as hell but you aren’t as fast as I thought you were. One more minute, and it’ll be over for you.

Still, the moment I thought about it, something happened. A loud noise sliced through the air, reminiscent of the sound that a sheet of thick paper makes when being ripped to pieces in front of a microphone. Although I couldn’t see any lightning or other visual effects, the sound was growing ever louder, as if the very fabric of the universe was being torn apart.

I wasn’t the only person who must have thought about it. All the creatures in the canyon below stopped as if on cue. The pursuers looked anxiously at Letraine who too turned to them in fear — yes, in fear, you read it right — as if seeking their support.

The panther-man was the first to come round. Instead of waiting for the ear-shattering sound to stop, he simply vanished.

Or so I thought.

Letraine screamed the kind of scream only crocmen can emit. His jaws gaped wide as he pummeled the air with his fists. Then he waved his hand to the others and scarpered back. The others followed in his wake just as speedily as they’d come, as if being chased. How interesting.

Still, I was more curious about the panther guy. What could have happened to him?

Orael answered my question by pointing his hand at something below.

Aha. So that’s where the entrance to this damned maze must be. It couldn’t have been otherwise because I’d just glimpsed the panther-man’s black coat amid the pillars. He must have thought the place good enough for hiding — definitely better than ending one’s life in a croc’s jaws.

The unbearable ripping sound was getting closer. My eardrums were ringing; my skin erupted in goosebumps. I was quite prepared to jump down the cliff and follow in Letraine’s wake if that could help me stop hearing it.

Luckily for me, Orael seemed to be experiencing the same. “Rumis — enough!”

Then we were spat back into Rumis’ house.

I stood in the warmly heated room, holding hands with Orael and Rumis. Letraine was sitting at the table behind them.

Only now did I notice how old he actually looked compared to his younger self I’d just seen. His skin seemed to have darkened; his eyes were lined with wrinkles; and that’s not even mentioning all the hi tech upgrades he’d received in Mechilos.

Luckily, my friends seemed to be still in one piece. Arts stood frozen with the plasma gun at the ready; Traug clenched the sword. Letraine’s bodyguards were still lying on the floor — fully conscious but apparently aware that this was the safest position for them at the moment.

“That wretched panther-man you’ve just seen,” Orael said, letting go of my hand, “he took something from us. Something very valuable.”

“What’s that?”

“A piece of a very rare metal. Rare even in the Central Worlds. It’s called the Inturia of the Astral Sky.”

I turned quizzically to Arts. She was quite good with those things. If indeed it was worth anything, Arts surely would have known.

Still, Arts shrugged back. So!

“Don’t bother looking it up,” Orael said. “You can’t have known anything about it. It’s not your problem, anyway. So here’s our proposal. You bring Inturia back to us, and we’ll help you to get Farhall. If it’s a yes, then it’s a deal. If it's a no, then—“ grinning, Orael made a helpless gesture.

“You don’t think that whatever he had in that cloth is still hidden inside that maze, do you?”

Arts tensed. “Which maze?”

“The panther-man never made it back to the Gate,” Orael said, ignoring her question. “We kept an eye on the place for a long time. Nor did he turn up in the nearest settlement which is Salet-agh-Eth.”

“Salet-agh-Eth?” Traug gasped, also tensing.

“From which we can draw the conclusion that he must have died in the maze. All that’s left to do is find his body and recover Inturia.”

“Like hell we will,” Arts said.

“That’s suicide,” Traug agreed.

“What makes you say that?” I asked them.

“Because,” Arts said, looking dangerously trigger-happy, “this pretty face forgot to tell you the most important thing. Which is the location of that wonderful piece of scenery.”

“Where is it, then?”

“It’s exactly where we least wanted to go. It’s the shittiest, most abominable place in all of the Interworld Network. It’s in Atrain.

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Chapter 7

AS EVERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN KNOWS, a good deal is when both partners are confident they managed to fool the other party. Because if one of them consciously deceives the unsuspecting partner, that's fraud. And if one sets up impossible conditions and the other one agrees to them, that's even worse — that's nothing short of stupidity.

I knew it all — and still I agreed to Orael's proposition voiced by Letraine. Firstly, because I couldn't see any better alternatives. And secondly, because the task came without a deadline. Orael hadn't set any specific timeframes, like wanting us to fetch Inturia by the end of the week, or month, whatever.

The way I looked at it, their little mechanoid outfit didn't risk much at all. If I managed to find Inturia, they'd get their coveted prize — and if I didn't, they'd get rid of a bothersome prying human.

Still, we sealed the contract with an Oath, listing all sorts of addenda and guarantees to ensure our mutual commitments — which boiled down to Letraine's promise to help me get to the stone provided I fetched Inturia for him.

"Oh hi, Litius," was the first thing I said when I'd left Rumis' house.

The two guards — Warhammerer and Floater — lay leaning against the steps apparently unconscious, their eyes half-closed. As I shook Litius' paw, I realized he must have positioned them like this for the Guards' sake in case a patrol showed up. Like, these two poor dudes had had a glass too much, entrusting Litius with the task of escorting them home — but he was apparently too feeble and unfit for such a weightlifting job...

“Hi yourself,” the catman said coolly.

“Decided to wait outside?”

“Just thought that staying out here would be less risky and more productive. Unlike Arts and Traug, I don’t possess any combat skills, so I chose to cover the rear and keep an eye on these two.”

My poor brain, too poisoned by all the black thoughts, suggested that Litius had simply chickened out, too scared to confront an obviously stronger enemy. Could he have heard of Letraine before or even have had some dealings with him, maybe? Or both? Or maybe I was getting paranoid?

“Serge, this is lunacy,” Arts announced as she came rushing out after me. “We can’t go to Atrain. We just can’t stick our necks out like this.”

Traug kept silent, his heavy glare drilling a hole in me, apparently completely in agreement with the girl.

Litius looked over us with curiosity before offering his two cents, “If you ask me, I should abstain from visiting the world in question.”

“What if we find a better place to discuss it?” I said.

No one objected. Indeed, the dark street wasn’t the best location to discuss any plans of world domination. Okay, maybe not exactly domination in our case because even visiting the world in question appeared to be problematic. And the Syndicate seemed like the best kind of place to talk about it. “Best” being the operative word: why not use it when you’re the only watering hole in town devoid of any competition?

Ouch, why was I getting all sarcastic again?

Strangely enough, the Syndicate was seething with activity. It could be because our city had recently become the grand center of the universe (or

at least of Cesspit, for that matter). Or it could be because all the fighting and other hoo-hah was finally over, giving way to peace and tranquility. What else are you supposed to do during a lull before the storm? — you drink and make merry. Which was what everybody else seemed to be doing right now.

Unsurprisingly, it was beginning to annoy me. Still, I didn't show it. We took a table in a far corner. Litius and Traug went to fetch some beers, leaving me alone with Arts. I fidgeted in place, not knowing how to get on with her. 'Just forget it,' she'd said, but even the slightest of disagreements still leaves its mark, making you too wary of even hinting at the subject that had once been the bone of contention. That's what creates all those uncomfortable silences — but only when you really appreciate this person and your friendship. Me, I'd screwed it, stupidly and unfairly hurting someone who'd helped me out all too many times.

Luckily for me, we'd managed to avoid any awkward small talk because the other two were already on their way back. Traug poured out the beer, setting full mugs on the table in front of each of us.

At the very thought of a chilled beer, my mouth began to water. It took all of my self-control to push the mug away.

"Why, what's wrong?" Traug demanded, uncomprehending.

"I've been at it for a week already," I said firmly. "Time to call it a day."

"The bottle is a family's ruin," Arts drawled sarcastically. "You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Considering all the time I've spent in Serge's company since the day we first met, I'd like to point out that jumping to conclusions would be highly premature," Litius said. "Between Traug and myself, we must have consumed ten times that."

“Thanks, Litius. Nice to know I still have a friend.”

Arts chuckled. “This fish eater just doesn’t do sarcasm. Talking about friends, you don’t happen to remember by any chance whose sorry ass it was that Traug and I we saved earlier today?”

“Okay, okay. It was a bad joke. You’d better tell me what’s wrong with Atrain?”

This was apparently what they call a sixty-four-thousand dollar question. Something that’s normally preceded by a blaze of fanfares on TV shows, followed by the host’s offer of either answering it or taking the money.

Arts and Traug exchanged glances. Litius opened his mouth to speak but didn’t get the chance to say anything because Arts interrupted him.

“It’s just trouble, trust me. Besides, you wouldn’t want to meet the kinds of monsters they have there.”

“Which is what?”

“No one really knows. They’ve been heard but have never been seen,” Arts said with a helpless gesture.

Traug nodded. “Weird things are happening there. It all started with the Gate shutting in their furthermost city. It’s been a few years. That’s when it first started. Players keep disappearing. And everyone hears those weird sounds just before they, you know...”

“What kinds of sounds?” I asked. “It’s not like paper being ripped, by any chance?”

Arts and Traug exchanged glances again.

“Yeah, sort of,” Traug said. “Paper or maybe fabric. I heard it a couple of times. Gave me goosebumps. Luckily, I was smart enough and just scarpered.”

“You see now?” Arts snapped at me, seething. “Even this half-wit was smart enough to get out of there. But you absolutely have to go right into the fire!”

“Litius?” I asked. “What do you think?”

The catman rubbed his nose. Had he had a pair of glasses, he probably would have rearranged them. “If my opinion can be of any help,” he began, “It’s a rather interesting world. Inhabited by Players alone. In days of old, it used to be referred to as the Grand Bazaar. But those days are long gone...”

“Litius, mind giving us a history lesson some other time?”

“The World Traveler’s Almanac has given Atrain nine out of ten danger-wise. Players are strongly discouraged from visiting it. Barely 50% of travelers come back to tell the tale — the majority of whom are known smugglers and looters.”

“Okay, okay. Do me a favor, Lish, and try to collect as much information about Atrain as you can, will you? I want to know everything about it. And please try to research a stone called Farhall. It’s apparently in Mechilos, topping the staff of the Manager of the First Order. Think you can remember all that?”

Litius nodded, then finished his beer in two gulps. “I can,” he said, wiping the beer off his muzzle.

“If you ask me, we should try and get the stone ourselves,” Arts grumbled. “Mechilos may be a tough nut to crack but Atrain might cost some of us their lives! I don’t think Letraine is the only corrupt mechanoid. We have plenty of time and money.”

I scratched my head. If the truth were known, time was an issue. Even if I managed to temporarily counter the side effects of my Dark Avatars, how long would I be able to resist their control by beating the living daylights out of a gym punchbag? The sooner I collected all the stones and got to see the Choruls, the better.

“Talking about money,” Litius spoke. “I came across this investment opportunity... all I want to say is that you’d better not c-c-count on me, guys.”

Arts opened her eyes wide. “What, all six kilos?”

“Alm-most. The offer was too good to m-m-miss...”

“That could have kept you in cat food for the rest of your life!”

“All right, all right, cool it,” I said. “I’ll have to do some thinking. There’re several options we can discuss. I understand. If it’s really so bad, I’m not gonna take you to Atrain. This is my personal headache, anyway.”

They didn’t respond. None of them said, *‘Don’t even think about it! We’re with you for better or for worse!’* They didn’t even nod their agreement. They just stayed silent.

Arts made a show of turning away. Traug lowered his head. Even Litius was looking at me with those big guilty eyes like a kitten who’d made a mess on the floor. As if I was about to take him to task for having spent his own money.

“No problem,” I said, standing up. “Hope you’re not mad at me for asking.”

“The only thing that drives me mad,” Arts said, “is the fact that you’re such an incorrigible fool.”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s something you’ll have to live with,” I replied. “Where can I find you tomorrow?”

“Well, where else can you find these two winos?” she retorted. ‘They’ll be here. And I’ll be here too. I might do a bit of drawing for a change.”

“Got it.”

I was about to leave when I was almost knocked off my feet by a giant hulk of a man. At first, I even thought he was a Korl — but the dark color of his eyes and hair betrayed his human origins. As for the rest, he was the epitome of the Korl race, slightly shorter than myself but with shoulders twice the size, with a barrel chest and ape-like build, his arms splayed — apparently, ensuring his armpits didn’t get sweaty.

Before the moment of our impact, this individual had been busy carrying two beers in his shovel hands — not for very long though, because he spilled half of it all over my favorite magic trench coat.

No idea what happened in my mind then, but it just snapped. Before I knew it, I was already casting Combat Telekinesis on him.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 14.

Your fame has increased to 19.

Your Reputation has changed to Brawler.

Wow. So many updates at once! I must have done something truly extraordinary. Arts’ pale face and the silence in the room were proof enough.

The big guy — whose development branch was apparently **Shapeshifter** — was now scrambling off the floor, his angry glare firmly fixed on me. Then again, I wasn’t too slow on the draw, either.

My Dark Avatars seemed to have jumped at their chance. I was already reaching for my evil sword when the guy cracked a beaming smile.

“That’s okay, dude,” he said. “Just a misunderstanding. No sweat.”

Immediately, the tension subsided. The room filled with voices once again. The bar owner and a few other Players hurried toward the Shapeshifter to help him back to his feet while he waved their help away, grinning. As in, *I’m okay, no problem*. Charismatic bastard.

I would have even believed him had I not noticed my friends’ faces. They were white as a sheet. Judging by their expressions, the lid of my coffin had already been nailed shut and the coffin itself carted off.

Me, I just walked nonchalantly out of the Syndicate. One problem at a time. At the moment, this guy wasn’t at the top of the list.

I glanced at my watch. This little negotiation with the mechanoid crooks had taken a while. I might have to go to the bank first thing tomorrow morning. Had Arts really said that our little trade in Beholder’s fat had fetched them six kilos? Not bad at all. Still, getting rich was the last thing on my mind now.

I needed that stone. Farhall. It was in possession of that Manager of the First Order, or whatever they called him. Which meant I needed to go and see him. I could either ask him to surrender the stone to me (which was unlikely) or use some other more convincing methods (which was probably more realistic). Now I needed to check if I really needed Letraine’s help or whether I could do it under my own steam.

Having said that, I seemed to have my own man in Mechilos... okay, not exactly a man but still.

I drafted a quick plan for tomorrow. The day promised to be busy.

As I waited for the cab, I noticed that I was unconsciously fiddling with the cigarette I'd somehow pulled out of my pocket. Half of the tobacco had already fallen out, leaving the paper crumpled and starting to tear. I might need to buy me a rosary for any future meditations, instead of this rather fragile substitute.

I flung the whole packet into the nearest trash can and headed toward the approaching cab.

By now, my head had grown heavy and brimming with unkind thoughts. This morning's lightness and good cheer had all but disappeared by the evening. I kept stealing unconscious glances at my cell, only to realize that I was hoping for a call or a text from someone — anyone at all.

Anyone at all? Yeah, right. Pull the other one. Who was I trying to kid?

The thought made me even angrier. I shoved the cell back into my pocket.

Just as I walked toward the front door, I bumped into Professor. I'd hoped to say a quick hello and slip by, but no such luck. Professor was in a talkative mood, impatient to show his gratitude.

"Greetings, Serge!"

"Oh hi."

"I'd like to thank you once again. That conversation of ours, it put me back on the right track."

"But that was something you'd been told before, Sir."

"But talking is one thing and doing is another. Take my daughters, for instance. They seem to be ashamed of me now. They don't come to visit us

anymore. It’s only my old lady that runs off to visit them behind my back. And why?”

“Why?” I repeated. That was the first time I’d heard he even had children.

“Because they don’t believe I can quit the bottle. I already promised them so many times. I swore on my life I would. But then it just starts up again,” he waved a futile hand. “A good reputation is hard to earn but all too easy to lose. And with a track record like mine, it takes one a while to get your karma back up.”

I startled at his last words. It was as if he was now talking not about himself but about me.

Still, I didn’t say anything. You can’t cut someone short when they’re pouring their heart out to you. They might never get another chance.

“Now I can only prove myself by my deeds. So I’ve just started. I got myself a job as a carpenter with the house maintenance. There were no takers for the kind of money they were prepared to pay. I only agreed just to remind myself of what work feels like. Luckily, I’m quite clever with my hands so it might just work out. Besides, I just started doing more physical work overall.”

“Great,” I said, not exactly sure what it was that he wanted from me.

“I swept out the stairwell. The mailboxes were all lopsided because the wall plugs had all loosened up, so I replaced them. Oh by the way,” he added, producing a stack of letters and bills and handing them to me, “you should really check your mail from time to time. Your mailbox is busted. Someone has already ripped something off and thrown it on the floor.”

“Thanks, Sir.”

“Listen, Serge, if ever you need anything, just give me a nod. It’s very important for me — and for everybody else, for that matter — to feel needed. D’you get me?”

I was itching to ask the old boy if he’d already had one or two today. Still, he looked dead serious; his eyes sparkled, his voice was trembling. So I just nodded and shook his hand. “Aren’t you going up? It’s getting cold here.”

“I might hang about here for a bit. It just feels so good sometimes to just stand and think. A breath of evening air is a good thing. Helps one sleep.”

I checked the mail as I walked up the stairs. Mainly bills, one of them even a “final warning” printed in red: you owe us 6,323.12 rubles[2]. A whopping amount of money, especially for a Player who’d just spent a kilo of dust to fix yesterday’s meeting with Letraine and another two to get the low-down on the stone. As soon as I’d entered my apartment, the bills went straight on the floor.

“No need to litter the place,” Bumpkin chastised me. “Where do you want me to put all this?”

“Put them on the table,” I said. “Or even better, just bin them. Life is about to change dramatically in the next couple of months. No one will give a damn about bills anymore.”

“You should always honor your debts,” Bumpkin grumbled as he took the bills — not to the trash can in the kitchen but to the lounge.

Obstinate bastard. I peeled my clothes off, washed my hands and splashed some water on my face, just to hear the bathroom mirror whisper, *“only a mother could love a face like that”*.

Well, sorry, I didn’t have a better one. Now that my body had already cleansed itself from the effects of alcohol, the puffiness was gone — but still my face had somehow changed imperceptibly, acquiring new accents, cold, strange and cruel.

“Can’t a man get something to eat in this house?” I grumbled, slumping at the kitchen table.

I couldn’t believe I’d just said that. Bumpkin must have really spoiled me. I used to be a decent cook myself, after all; I’d never had problems fixing my own dinners. Okay, they might not have been of the cordon bleu kind, but still. And now I was getting pretty useless in the kitchen; I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to microwave a meal already sitting in the fridge.

I ground my teeth and started spooning out the vegetable stew, amazed at my own spite which seemed to have become my constant companion these days. Bumpkin stood in the doorway, watching me closely without saying a word.

Yes, I even managed to microwave it. But as soon as I sat down and picked up the spoon, the annoying sound of the doorbell ruined the peace and quiet. I startled so badly I nearly knocked over both the plate and the table.

Bumpkin cast a scared glance at the door, then at myself. What did he think I could do? I drew the Gramr — seeing as using the plasma gun in the closed space of my apartment would be counterproductive — and slowly moved toward the hallway, trying not to make any noise.

I didn’t like visitors at the best of times — whatever few I got. Normally, it used to be Hunter who dared disrupt my solitude. Arts had popped in a couple of times too. Now one of them was dead and the other had only parted ways with me less than an hour ago.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I peeked through the peek hole.

Well, well, well. A strange visit indeed. I opened the door a crack. I wasn't in a hurry to swing it wide open because that would expose my right hand — my sword hand.

"To what do I owe such a late visit, Guard?"

Because it was a Guard, even though he looked a bit off. Not that he differed a lot from his colleagues in the Game's law enforcement department, but once you took in the details, you couldn't but start asking questions. Firstly, why was his mask ashen gray instead of black? Secondly, why were his robes this sickly white color, clashing dramatically with the gray décor of the stairwell? And thirdly, since when had the Guards taken a liking to the latest in the most expensive nail art?

"You owe it to our blood bond," my late visitor hissed in a macabre but unmistakably female voice.

Only now did I realize the Guard was pulling my leg. The Guard? I had a funny feeling I'd heard that voice before. Because I knew of only one other family member capable of pulling off such bizarre practical jokes.

"Mind letting me in already?" my sister Lily said, removing the Guard's mask while cracking a triumphant smile.

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Chapter 8

MAN IS THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS, as they say. Our knowledge of the world around us is incredibly subjective because things keep transforming, caught in the process of permanent change, denying us our right to absolute truth. To give you an example, there was no place for the idea of justice in my own little worldview anymore. Because what could possibly be fair about Hunter's death?

Now Lily, she was totally different. She'd been raised on the ideas of the Romantic era where everyone was supposed to be brave, honest and willing to sacrifice their all to a noble cause. No wonder she was an odd one out. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd indeed decided to join the Guards. As long as she didn't join the Seers...

"Fancy some tea?" I asked. "Or do Guards prefer something stronger in the evening?"

"I'm not a Guard yet. I'm only a Novice. I hope they give me some proper robes soon. My neck is already itching."

She pulled her top robes off, leaving them in the hallway. Now she was no different from her old self, barring the translucent name tag hovering above her head, mentioning her development branch. Talking about which...

"What does it mean, **Lightbug**?"

"Just wait! I'm gonna show you. It's totally badass."

She was a completely different person now. Where were her Nordic cool and sangfroid? As soon as she'd become a Player (as if it were that

simple), her character had completely changed. What kinds of words were these, anyway — badass? My little sis had been spending too much time on the street just lately. And then she brings it home with her!

In the meantime, she went into the kitchen, picked up a stool, studied it all over and set it back down under the table. That done, she got busy outlining its shape in the air with swift strokes of her hand, building a luminous copy of it. After only a few seconds, she was offering it to me, looking like the cat that got the cream: an identical wobbly stool which seemed to be woven out of glowing light.

“Sit yourself down,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Just do it!”

I gingerly planted my backside on the glowing piece of nothingness. Strangely enough, it felt okay.

With a mischievous smile, Lily threw her fiery hands in the air. The stool immediately expired, sending me flying to the floor so hard that I very nearly left my tailbone lying next to the plinth.

“How’s that for cool?” she asked victoriously.

Poor old Bumpkin froze in the air by the ceiling above one of the top cupboards, looking fearfully at me. No wonder. Had it been any other Player who wasn’t part of my family, he’d now be picking up his loose fillings off the floor. But as it was, I simply scrambled back to my feet, grinding my teeth so hard that I nearly took all the enamel off them.

Still, Lily hadn’t noticed anything.

“Good girl! Well done. You can get a job at the theater by conjuring up stools for those who couldn’t get seats.”

“Yeah right. I’ve been taught all sorts of things.”

“Who taught you, the Guards?”

“Who else? Look at this!”

She changed places with me to position herself in the corridor which led past the bathroom into the hallway. Then she bent her elbow and brought it up in front of her.

A flash of light blinded me, materializing as a protection shield.

“How d’you like that? We’ve tried all kinds of weapons on it, even bows and crossbows. Nothing gets past it.”

“Master!” Bumpkin raised a warning hand.

But I was faster.

I acted on instinct, without even thinking. With a quick flick of my hand, I cast Combat Telekinesis. The spell flew from my fingers, ramming the shield like a ton of bricks.

Lily had been right. The shield withstood the attack. But Lily hadn’t. She was propelled to the very end of the corridor and slammed into the wall. She raised her hands awkwardly, trying to protect herself.

“That’s just an ordinary spell,” I said. “Not even a really strong one. And this is a plasma gun,” I added as I pulled it from my inventory. “One of the Central Worlds’ toys. It wouldn’t even leave a single photon of your shield behind.”

I felt my mouth open and close but it wasn’t me who was saying it. It was someone else, someone who’d taken up residence within me: a stranger, cold and contemptuous. It was a bit like a conscious dream when

you’re aware of the fact that everything around you is unreal but you’re too weak to do anything about it.

I clenched my teeth, straining every sinew, and miraculously managed to regain control of myself. My head was mine once again, and so were my arms, my legs and my mind.

A wave of unbearable shame flooded over me.

“He’s been a bit cranky just lately,” Bumpkin said, materializing next to Lily and softly stroking her head.

“I’m sorry, I...” I managed. “I just wanted to show you the weak side of your defenses.”

“Yeah right. You’re just like Uncle Denis. He thinks it’s better to learn to drink vodka at home rather than in bad company,” Lily replied, rubbing a sore elbow. She didn’t even appear to have taken offence. “And what’s this little fellow doing here?”

“Bumpkin’s the name,” my gallant little goblin introduced himself with a slight bow. “I’m Master Serge’s housekeeper.”

“Which Master Serge? You mean my brother here? How cool. Where can I get one?”

“House goblins aren’t pets,” I said, walking over to her and giving her a hand to get up. “You can’t just get them.”

“Okay, how can I adopt one?”

“You can’t. They’re not babies.”

“Oh please. You’ve never been such a killjoy. You’d better go make some tea instead of launching your sisters against the wall.”

“I’ve got some wonderful herbal tea that I stashed away,” Bumpkin groveled. “I make it for Master now and again.”

“Go on then, Mister Bumpkin,” Lily said out loud, as if afraid he wouldn’t hear. “It’ll be a pleasure to taste it,” she added, bowing in return.

Once we took our seats around the kitchen table, Bumpkin put the kettle on and got busy warming up the already cold pies while I started questioning her. Not exactly grilling her, nothing of the kind, but making careful note of all her answers.

At the end of the day, it was just as I’d thought it was.

“They wouldn’t accept me in the Order straight away, would they? First I’d need to learn all the basic combat spells. And I’d need to be level 10 at least. Then they’d give me all their usual items and artifacts. Secondly, I’d need to serve as a novice so that they could watch me for a while and decide if I’m good enough. Thirdly, I could do the service in my own town. I won’t even have to move, how cool is that?”

I chuckled. “You’ve got yourself a dream life, eh?”

“And once my training is done, they’re going to take me to the nearest world which is Purgator.”

“A journey to die for.”

“You shouldn’t listen to him, Miss,” Bumpkin said as he set the tea cups on the table. “Your brother’s not been himself just lately. Other people’s happiness doesn’t cheer him up anymore. And even his own...”

“Bumpkin! Another word, and your chatty muzzle might regret it!”

“How did you know he was my brother?” Lily asked in surprise.

“He’s my master, isn’t he? I can tell his family from a mile away.”

“Bumpkin, mind shutting it? Go do something useful for a change. And you, Lily... seeing as you’re now with the Guards... okay, you’re only a novice but it doesn’t really matter. I want you to speak to your mentor.”

“We don’t have mentors. Only supervisors.”

“Okay, your supervisor.”

“So what is it you want me to talk to him about?”

“There’s a guy in your order... a Player. I need a favor from him.”

*** * ***

Lily wasn’t in the best of moods when she left. Predictably, she didn’t like my plan. She was equally unhappy about my request not to visit me anymore nor show that we knew each other when there were other people around. The fact that we were siblings was something that no Player was supposed to know. Not that it was a great secret, of course, because some of the Guards and Seers knew it already. But still we should err on the side of caution.

She didn’t look as if she shared my feelings. One day when she had become a seasoned Player she might realize what it had been I was doing now. She might — but not now.

Not that I needed her approval. The combined effects from my Dark Avatars gave me one considerable advantage: Serge Demidov didn’t need anybody’s approval anymore. Neither did I have any qualms about what I’d already done — or was about to do.

Exhausted by the all the events of the day, I fell asleep on the couch without even bothering to make the bed. Bumpkin’s unhappy grumbling reached me through my closed eyelids — but it had the effect of a strong

sleeping pill, sending me down a deep, dark pit and covering me with its heavy blanket.

Something was going on around me. I glimpsed flashes of something running, laughing, flickering past. For a split second I thought I heard familiar voices. One was the Red Horseman. The other...

Finally, I startled awake, furious. I felt like ripping someone apart. It took me a while to realize that I'd been dreaming. I reminded myself of a woman who stops talking to her husband simply because she had a dream about him cheating on her.

It was only 8 a.m. but I was already wide awake, so I felt obliged to get up. A shower helped me to organize my thoughts but did little to quench the fire burning inside me. I needed to punch something pronto.

Bumpkin was absent — if not from my heart, then definitely from the kitchen. I was obliged to cook myself a couple of eggs, with a rather inadequate result — which was probably the grand total of my cooking skills. I'd admittedly been taking Bumpkin's haute cuisine for granted just lately. Too much of a good thing.

I decided not to wait for him to come back, for fear of having another argument. So I just grabbed my backpack with my stuff and hurried out.

Morning isn't a good time of day to improve one's cheer. I tend to divide all morning people into two categories: early birds and nutcases. The way I looked it at, there wasn't much difference between the two. You've got to be nuts to willingly get out of bed before 10 a.m. Personally, I was more than just a night owl: I was downright nocturnal. No wonder I carried my own early-morning mood around with me, which was appropriately lethargic and gloomy verging on tragic.

Never in the best of moods in the morning, today I was obnoxious even if I say so myself. I kicked a street trash can out of my way so hard that it dented. I yelled at some noisy schoolchildren crowding the sidewalk

in front of their school. I even very nearly cast an Arc on a flock of sparrows chirruping happily up a bare tree. Why? — because they were driving me nuts.

I must have been too consumed by all this array of dark emotions to notice all the weird things that were happening around me. Only when I'd already reached the bus stop had I realized that something was off. It wasn't just deserted — the entire street was. The last passerby, an old boy, jay-walked across the street. And no, he wasn't struck by a car because there were no cars. This busy junction which connected the ring road to the main street, which assaulted your ears even at nighttime with its roaring of revving motors and the thumping of rap music, was now completely devoid of any vehicles.

I stopped, drawing the sword, as I took a good look around me. Okay, maybe "deserted" was an overstatement. At least one other passerby was following in my wake: a middle-aged man in an overcoat, his back hunched, his eyes firmly fixed on the tarmac under his feet. The only thing that gave him away was a name tag hovering over his head: **Kraken**.

And I had a funny feeling he wasn't the only guest invited to this party. I swept the nearest buildings with my Sharp Eye which pointed out a silhouette perched on the roof of the nearest apartment block. Although the distance was too great for me to read the name of their development branch, I had a funny feeling it was probably something to do with target fire.

Having realized that I'd sussed him out, the stooping old dude stopped beating about the bush. He raised his head and ran his hand along his long thin whiskers, as if thinking, then smiled at me.

So he wasn't human, after all. A beastman.

"Greetings, Serge. Or should I say, Player Serge? Which one would you rather prefer?"

“I’d rather prefer that you make yourself scarce before I get the chance to smash your head in.”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

There was a method in my chatting. In the course of our brief interaction, I managed to imperceptibly shift my body to the right so as to find myself directly between this Kraken and the hitman on the roof. A regular man would find such an unsafe positioning bizarre — but for me, it was perfect. These two needed me alive, otherwise the sniper on the roof would have already taken me out.

“So what is it you want?” I asked.

Kraken wasn’t in a hurry to reply.

I froze, expecting the worst. Which wasn’t long in coming: as soon as I’d stopped, a shot rang out. Something prickly sank into my back, sending the poison flowing through my body.

Still, it wasn’t quick enough.

[∞]

Now... now... wait a little more... just now!

I leapt to the left.

Instinctively, Kraken lurched after me. His arms began to lengthen, transforming into tentacles — but by then, the hitman had gotten his act together too. Kraken ouched, his eyes glazing over as he stared at me, reaching his not-quite-shapeshifted limb after me.

Then he dropped backwards onto the tarmac.

He didn’t vanish — which meant he wasn’t dead. Just as I’d thought. They’d had no intention of killing me, just getting a taste of my body.

Still, it was too early to celebrate. I swung round and ran, zigzagging, toward the house. Another shot ran out. And yet another. Dammit!

[∞]

Another shot ran out. And yet another. Now!

The *Incremental Apparition* threw me backward toward the cold wall. I pressed my cheek to it for a second, just to assure myself that all this was happening for real. Then I ran along the wall into the building’s back yard.

The nearest front door was locked — but I still managed to slide the tips of my fingers into the narrow crack and yank the magnetic lock open. I just loved being a Korl.

Running all the way up to the fifth floor without stopping proved to be the hardest. My body was screaming that it hadn’t signed up for this sort of thing. My calves were completely blocked already. The Game, however, couldn’t be more pleased:

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 14.

Just as I’d expected, the loft wasn’t locked, the broken padlock lying on the concrete floor. I took the last flight of stairs to the top in two leaps.

The stench of bird crap assaulted my nostrils. Several pigeons fluttered into the air right in front of me. My foot squelched, slipping on something unsavory.

Still, there was no time to be squeamish. I was consumed by one emotion alone, which was uncontrolled fury of the animal kind, carnivorous and almost impossible to control. This was what fueled me, giving me the strength to go on.

I promptly took cover behind a brick wall. I peeked out a few times, using my Sharp Eye to scan the whole area. All clear.

I ran over to the tiny skylight which opened on to the sloping roof. I didn't even stop to contemplate the dangers of scrambling over it at such a great height. I just shot out like a demon consumed by internal flames.

Then I froze.

The roof was empty. I desperately looked all around me, refusing to believe my own failure.

Then I walked over to the spot where the hitman had only just been. I picked up a single spent shell case. So he'd been here, no doubt about it.

I leaned over the edge, trying to catch sight of the prostrated Kraken, and cussed. No one! What was that now?

How long could it have taken me to climb up the stairs? Thirty seconds tops. Plus the time it had taken me to get into the loft, look around for a moment and reach the roof. Can't have been more than a minute.

One thing was clear: I'd grossly underestimated my opponents.

By the time I'd climbed back down and walked out the front door, the street was already busy with cars and passersby. Hm. I seemed to have something to this effect in my own inventory.

I reached into it and produced the familiar chunk of stone veined with green.

Repelling Stone

No of Charges: 99/100

Range: 60 ft.

Duration of one charge: 1 hr.

Where was the other one, then? I rummaged through my entire stores and ground my teeth. What was that now? If these two idiots had somehow stolen it, how on earth could they have done it? Secondly, if they'd only stolen the stone itself, why hadn't they touched any of my pep goodies? This just didn't make sense.

As it had often happened just lately, whenever I'd come across something that didn't make sense, I felt a wave of anger flooding over me. So I just juggled my backpack into place and headed for the gym.

This time I didn't feel so bad anymore. Besides, there were fewer people around than yesterday. So I just walked over to my punchbag and started hammering at it, venting all my anger. I was obliged to stop a few times waiting for the Vigor bar to come back up. Within the hour, my results were quite decent. I even allowed myself the pleasure of rereading all the messages.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 13.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 4.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 13.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 14.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 5.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 15.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 6.

Now that's what I call a proper training session for a champion!

In total, I pummeled the punchbag for well over an hour, only taking the tiniest of breaks. I even practiced the freshly-created Combat Blow which was what had garnered me that new level in Destruction. By the end, I was drenched in sweat; other gym customers couldn’t hide their bemusement as they eyed the puny kid having a go at the punchbag.

Finally, I was so drained I barely made it to the showers — but I was still angry. Not as furious as an hour earlier, but some of my negativity still lingered, seething in my blood.

Dammit! Induced by my Dark Avatars, my anger was probably akin to a bacteria colony which kept growing and multiplying with every passing day, constantly increasing my need for more of the “antibiotics” necessary to keep the infection in check. I needed to find a solution.

I took a bus to the Community. I just wanted to take a little stroll to put my head in order. I got off one stop before and walked unhurriedly along the snow-powdered sidewalk. I shoved the backpack into my inventory; I couldn’t have done so earlier because coming to the gym empty-handed without any gear would have looked weird to say the least. But now I didn’t need it any longer.

The wind crumbled the fine snow, crushing it into a powder. The sun was concealed by a thick haze. The street was deserted as everyone had already made their way home, taking cover from the elements. How I understood them. This wasn’t the right kind of weather to hang about in.

Then I stopped, looking at the charred remains of a burned-out log house across the street. It was a rather common sight in our part of the world. The local council seemed to be bent on redesigning the city center with office buildings and other useful highrise facilities — but the small house owners in the area weren’t really willing to part with their “family estates”. Some refused out of principle; others just didn’t like the options they were offered while yet others wanted to wait for a better offer. Until finally — by pure chance, of course — the house would “accidentally”

catch fire when everybody’s out at work, allowing the council to buy it for virtually nothing.

Now I was looking at a shining example of such a real estate “deal”. The charred one-story log house appeared abandoned. It had long been stripped of all its furniture; even two of its windows had been stolen. Its roof was sagging and threatening to collapse in the near future. Perfect for my purposes.

I stole a look around me. Still no one. It was now or never.

I acted on impulse, imbuing the spell with all my mana and fury which was still pent up within me like stale bile.

The house groaned. The joists snapped; the ridge beam collapsed, sending the roof crashing down to the ground.

Your Creation skill has increased to level 2.

Giving me a new level in Creation for destroying a house? Whatever you said, this Game had a certain sense of humor. Never mind. So what was that spell I’d invented?

Rupture (Destruction). Disintegrates an object of your choice into several smaller parts. Activation requires visual contact with the object.

Cost: 150 mana points

The most important thing was, I felt normal again. The Dark Overlord Serge had disappeared, replaced by the old Player Serge. No idea how long it would last but here I was. Not that it made me any happier. Just as I’d suspected, the taming of my rancor required an enormous effort. And the longer it lasted, the more sacrifices its altar would demand.

Admittedly, there was a way out, both simple and straightforward. Still, I didn’t like it. Because it made me weaker, throwing me several steps

back.

With these thoughts in mind, I made it to the Community. I beelined for the Syndicate, only to find Arts alone, doodling in her album as usual.

”Hi,” I said. “Where’s everyone?”

“Traug’s having a nap,” she replied. “Litius is off looking up all the data you asked him to.”

“Okay, listen up. I need to talk to you.”

Now that all the anger had gone, I found it easy to tell Arts everything that had happened to me earlier. Besides the two dudes who’d assaulted me today, I also mentioned the Korl who’d attacked me in the courtyard the other day. I also mentioned the missing artifact. All in all, I felt like I was on the shrink’s couch. I just couldn’t solve this riddle on my own. I needed a fresh outlook.

Besides, after everything that had happened, I knew I could trust Arts with my life. Just think that she’d gone back to Rumis, risking her life for me, despite my earlier tantrums.

“Those guys for sure weren’t from the Central Worlds,” she finally summed up.

“Why not?”

“That’s not their style. They’re, how can I put it, a bit wishy-washy. But by the same token I can tell it wasn’t their first time. There must be someone behind them, helping them.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I do sometimes indulge in this activity. And it must have been that same someone who helped them escape today.”

“But what about the artifact? They used my Repelling Stone to clear the street! How did they get to it?”

“It didn’t really have to be the stone. You have any idea how many ways there are to deceive a commoner’s eye? Not just artifacts but also scrolls, runes and spells. And that, by the way, is another clue that those guys weren’t from the Central Worlds.”

“But why?”

“Because they’d have simply come, done their thing and left. Remember what happened in Skirtsville’s Community? Now that was more than the guys from the Central Worlds’ style.”

“So someone’s trying to hunt me down, is that it? I feel flattered.”

“One can always get rid of the Avatars,” Arts said without actually addressing me, “and bring one’s karma back up.”

“Even if I do get rid of them, even if they stop affecting me — how am I supposed to prove it to all the other Players? They’ll know no peace until they see me dead. Pointless, isn’t it? But you’re right about karma. I already thought about that. I need to try what I’ve already done and save another city. Kill a beholder or whatever monster keeps the townspeople hostage. But... that would make me weaker. Considerably so. The Savior Avatar doesn’t give me the same strength as the Destroyer and Conqueror do. And now that I’m being hunted down by some unidentified muggers, doing something like that would be downright stupid.”

I kept my voice calm and emotionless, managing to condense everything that had occupied my head for the last few days into just several phrases

Arts must have sensed how I felt. You could say we were on the same wavelength.

Finally, she nodded in agreement. “So what’re you gonna do?”

“While Litius is busy getting all the intel together, we could try and do our own little recon. And to begin with, I just might pay a surprise visit to a certain Kabirid I know.”

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Chapter 9

WHATEVER YOUR WALK OF LIFE, you should always make provision for the idiot who might be doing the work. It's a must whenever you write a set of safety regulations for a factory floor. You need to make sure you mention the craziest of situations that no normal person would ever even think of. Because an idiot is bound to follow your instruction to a T.

Ignore this rule to your own peril. Which was why, before even setting off for Mechilos, I made sure my plan was foolproof. And in this case, the proverbial fool was myself.

Amazingly, whenever I'd managed to vent all my fury, my head became remarkably clear. Now too I fully understood that venturing into the world of Mechanoids without having an experienced Player by my side would be asking for trouble. Trouble being the operative word. Besides, I was obliged to make provision for my own unpredictable mood swings and their consequences.

So I made sure I played it safe, by directly asking Arts (who wasn't particularly forthcoming) to join me on this jaunt.

Because, as I'd already learned during my first trip to Purgator, lone-ranger heroes don't live long enough to tell the tale. Especially if they're not familiar with the area's particularities. Even in Lily's case, her upcoming visit to the closest and most mundane of all worlds was presented to her as something she had to earn first — and not before she was ready. Yet another foolproof regulation.

Before leaving, we popped into the bank. It was a funny place located in one of those typical nineteenth-century two-story houses, with the ground floor in stone and the second floor in timber. Despite the modesty of the

building, it was quite apparent that there were some serious people working here. They had three Players in business suits posted at the entrance and a couple of attractive women as tellers, plus another guy sitting behind them — apparently, the manager.

I used my magic mirror to steal a look at the signboard on the front door. For any unsuspecting commoners, it read, Dream House Mortgage Financing, Inc. Just some petty loan sharks no one would want to be associated with.

I was curious how they were supposed to identify me as their client. I couldn't remember signing anything or filling out any forms the last time. But in the end, it turned out to be much simpler than I'd imagined. They just asked me to swear on the Game that I was indeed myself. How easy was that? Only after that did they grant me access to my own account.

To say I was gobsmacked would be an understatement. Six kilos and a hundred and eighteen grams!

"Are you withdrawing everything?"

"Not exactly. I'll leave a hundred and eighteen grams for a rainy day."

It must have been the pauper in me speaking, someone who'd never held so much money in his life. Besides, I might end up having to bribe someone over in Mechilos, provided everything went well with the Kabirid.

In just ten minutes, I'd become five times a ruble millionaire. If I wanted to do it by the book, I should be on my way to Monte Carlo or renting a race car for night-time joy rides around the city. Still, the night was still far off and I was in no mood to splurge.

For that reason, even without conferring, we headed directly for the only place which could bring us closer to our final goal.

I was a bit jittery. If the truth were known, we had virtually nothing to go on. And if the Kabirid reneged on his word, I might need someone's help just to get out of Mechilos. Admittedly, Ufir von Urt had left a good impression on me — but still I had a niggling doubt which kept gnawing away at any confidence I had in my plan. Call it my Intuition or gut feeling, but I had a sneaky suspicion that I wouldn't come out of this unscathed.

Still, this impulse was weak enough for me to ignore.

In the meantime, we went to the Gatehouse for the first leg of our journey. Instead of going via Rethnor and Virhort, we'd chosen a transfer through the stinky Skirtsville. The way I looked at it, the sheer stench in combination with the recent attack on the Community were enough to have made the place unpopular with Players.

It was a good guess. There was nobody inside.

"You're worrying yourself for nothing," Arts finally broke the silence once we'd made it to Purgator's Gatehouse. " The Tenth Order is not the nicest of places but if you keep your head down, no one's gonna touch you."

"I'll see what I can do," I told her as I studied the map of the Gates we were supposed to teleport to. Or should I say, I studied their numbers.

Because their cities didn't have names, only numbers. All the Gates in Mechilos — which was basically a single megalopolis so huge it had spread over their whole world — were meticulously numbered. As in, 3.6 or 6.9. The way I understood it, the first digit denoted the Order and the second one, the number of its respective Gate.

Still, I had no access to any of them, for the simple reason that I wasn't a mechanoid. How annoying. I'd love to find out what kind of a deal they must have struck with Gatekeepers to ensure that. Even in Elysium, they didn't obstruct anyone from entering, regardless of the color of their

karma. They might send you packing at the border crossing, but no one prevented you from actually traveling there.

In any case, the only place that was accessible to me was the Tenth Order. The lowest one. After checking the map a few times, I came to the conclusion that we needed Gate No 17. Or should I say, Gate 10.17. Sounded like the title of some sci fi movie.

Never mind. We might just as well first go there. And from there, it was only a stone's throw away.

Maybe.

"Should we be off, then?" I asked once our teleport cooldown had expired.

Without saying a word, Arts took me by the hand, watching closely as I placed the necessary amount of dust in the bowl.

"Ten point seventeen," I said, then added, unable to help myself, "bro."

The Gatekeeper ignored the last word.

A cloud of dust rose into the air, making me sneeze. I let go of Arts' hand. What could there be outside? I was dying to find out.

And to be honest, I just froze for a while, lost for words.

Because the sheer scale of it was mind-boggling.

A gigantic pyramid of concrete and steel towered before me. It was dark, illuminated by a myriad of lights. Its terraces must have been the proverbial Orders. I could make out a smattering of the tiniest dots surrounding the nearest Ninth-Order Gate, coming and going. Those must

have been mechanoids, because in order to get there, you needed to be at least partially a cyborg and a Mechilos citizen.

“So what do you think?” Arts said.

“To be honest, I’m speechless,” I replied. “This is monumental. A bit dark though. And hot with it.”

“The local star is only one-eighth as bright as our Sun, but the planet itself is much closer to it. You’ll get used to it. The Mechs have made a nice job of it. Let’s go.”

The Gate was located at a considerable distance from the city proper. And not just our Gate, either. Arts pointed out to the glowing dots to our right and left which were Gates 10.16 and 10.18.

The Gates seemed to surround the city on all sides: a silent megalopolis enveloped in the eternal gloom of the local planet, reminiscent of a weak early-morning haze.

Much to my surprise, my eyes quickly adapted to the dark. Wish I could say the same about the heat. I’d long removed my fur hat with the bonus to mana. Ditto for the sweater. I wished I could do the same with my pants and trench coat. Still, my good manners prevented me from doing the former in Arts’ company while my prudence wouldn’t let me do the latter. The bulk of my mana came from my trench coat. Taking it off would deprive me of a whole bunch of spells. For that reason, I was braving the heat pretending I was perfectly fine.

Arts — who’d been here before — removed all the extra clothing without hesitation, staying in a crop top and a pair of shorts. She even changed her boots for a pair of flats. They may have looked a bit ugly but they were definitely Game stuff. That was the whole problem with Players’ apparel because it was stat-oriented, with little regard for style.

Still, it wasn’t very nice of her. She could have told me about the heat. And judging by the mischievous glance with which she viewed my sweat-soaked exterior, she must have done it on purpose. Taking her revenge, yeah right. She was lucky I’d already whacked the living daylights out of that punchbag and finished off that ramshackle townhouse.

We walked over to the giant wall. I reached out and touched it with some trepidation. The monumental structure rose impossibly high. I could sense the pleasant cool and powerful breathing of the city secluded within.

A wave of elated joy rose within me, akin to what a child must feel while watching fireworks or admiring the first snow of winter. My breathing seized as I mouthed,

“Mechilos!”

“In your dreams,” Arts said, crushing my childish hope. “It’s the Ninth Order behind that wall there. It’s only for mechanoids.”

“I know. I might get a robotic wrist replacement,” I joked.

“Is that to improve your right hand’s performance, Master Bater? To have several gears? You’ve no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve seen guys like that. They start with a finger replacement, then have one hand done, then an arm, and in less than a year there’s nothing human left in them. Mechanoids only encourage it. They’re like, ‘flesh is weak, your body tissues deteriorate, their cells eventually all die, and that’s something that’ll never happen to a machine’. So in the end, all that’s left of them is a brain trapped inside a tin can.”

“Oh great. You sure know how to put a guy off, don’t you? Never mind. Let’s go. According to the map, that place is just to the left of the Gate. Over there, I think,” I said, pointing into the gloom. “Didn’t he say he would wait for us in the Tenth Order? I can’t see a damn thing.”

“Look closely. This *is* the Tenth Order. The only place in Mechilos open to non-citizens. This is where they live while waiting for their right to enter the city. Or their visitors. Take a better look.”

As we walked unhurriedly, I strained my vision as hard as I could. Finally, my Sharp Eye began to give results. I glimpsed something stir in the nearest heap of garbage.

The person’s development branch suited him perfectly: **Rummager**. I couldn’t see his face — firstly, because it was wrapped in a rag, and secondly, because he wasn’t in a hurry to introduce himself.

Gradually I began making out low mud huts and rickety shacks thrown together with whatever had come in handy. The area reminded me strongly of a refugee camp.

“There’re two ways of becoming a mechanoid,” Arts explained. “The first one is to officially apply for citizenship. They,” she again pointed over the wall, “are gonna run a check on you to make sure you haven’t committed any crimes in the nearby worlds. Then you’ve gotta pay the fee and wait till your turn comes up. Basically, it’s costly and requires a lot of red tape.”

“And what’s the other one?”

“The other one, you get yourself listed with the local job center. You choose an occupation that’s available, pass qualifying tests and receive a temporary residence permit. Then you’re all set. Once they get you fixed, you’ve got to complete your work contract and that’s it. You’re a citizen of Mechilos.”

“Holy cow. Why’s everybody so desperate to get here, then?”

“Well, it really got worse since that tragedy in Atrain. A whole lot more people want to join the mechanoids these days. Some left for the privacy of Cesspit while others chose to flee to the Central Worlds. But

there aren’t many takers for Purgator with its constant infighting, which is why...”

“Which is why they decided to come here instead. Wait a sec.”

I stopped and activated my Map Making. Predictably, we’d lost our way in the pitch blackness. I’d already cast Light several times (my very first spell!) but it was little help. I could just about glimpse a flicker of light about two hundred yards to the north — which, if Ufir’s and my maps were to be believed, was exactly where we needed to go.

The closer we got, the brighter the glow became until finally, it disintegrated into a flurry of little lights hovering in mid-air. After a while, we approached a smattering of lopsided low huts, each with a lamp burning over the front door.

But that wasn’t the most interesting thing. The combined light was just enough for me to make out a ginormous refuse site looming out of the dark behind the huts. It was swarming with spectral shadowy figures — but I couldn’t tell what kinds of creatures they actually were. The weak glow of their identity tags listing the names of their development branches were the only things I could see.

They worked in silence under the stern stares of their slave drivers. Kabirids. I could tell them everywhere, even in this gloom: their massive webbed wings, their crooked legs and hooved feet, their bald heads topped with short straight horns. Either these dudes had too much calcium in their bodies or their respective wives preferred the company of the Archali.

Now that I mention it, Kabirids were everywhere here. Some of them appeared to be guarding the actual huts. As soon as we’d stepped out of the surrounding gloom into the light, one of the demons hurried to bar our way.

Our attempt to explain that we weren’t some trespassers didn’t really succeed. Another couple of Kabirids joined the guards, followed by more until the place started to resemble an impromptu political rally. Seeing as I

was normally as far from politics as a man could be, I wasn't at all thrilled by all this show of attention.

Still, all the hoo-hah stopped as soon as another Kabirid had joined the crowd. Well-built but not very tall, he didn't really differ from his brethren, other than he sported a broken horn. He must have had some weight around here, because as soon as he raised a hand and clenched a fist, one of the guards stepped forward and started speaking, saying disgustingly strange foreign words in a deep throaty voice. Hadn't my mama told me to learn Kabiridish? Or was it English?

"This is private property," the guy with one horn said. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan. Would you please tell him that Serge is here?"

"Serge?" the chief Kabirid gave me a different kind of look, as if I'd just admitted I enjoyed night strolls at the cemetery wearing my best birthday suit. "Follow me. You stay here!"

His last words were addressed to Arts who'd started after me. The demonic guards hadn't appreciated her impulse. They whipped their weapons out of their inventories and pointed them all at her. Just a handful of spears and a couple of swords, nothing we couldn't have taken care of — but then again, maybe not.

In any case, it wasn't good form starting a courtesy call with a brawl. So I just nodded to Arts and followed One-Horn toward the refuse site.

"Master is over there," the Kabirid said, pointing vaguely in front of him. "You go and tell him yourself what you've got to say."

"Sounds good to me."

At least something seemed to be working. Admittedly, I'd half-expected this Ufir guy to be much harder to find. But no: we'd safely arrived in Mechilos, taken a bit of a stroll and found the place we needed. And here we were, about to be introduced to him. Had it not been for this wretched heat which made my neck and back permanently drenched in sweat, I couldn't have been happier. But this was nothing to complain about, really.

One-Horn's development branch admittedly made me curious. What kind of creature could a **Dendroid** be? He didn't resemble an Ent in the slightest. Okay, maybe if you looked at him from behind in the middle of the night but even then I wasn't sure.

I knew better than to ask him. One's development branch is too sensitive a subject to discuss. Besides, there were too many other things I was curious about.

"What are they all doing there?" I asked, pointing at the ghostly figures of Players swarming in the distance.

"They're doing the sorting. The only thing that's always in demand here is metal. Here in Mechilos, any kind of alloy will find a buyer. So Players go to the nearest worlds scavenging for junk, cast spells over it and bring it all here to sell it for scrap. Then we do all the triaging for them," he said, pointing at the City, "and that's our little money-spinner. Or not ours exactly because it's Master who owns it."

My eyes had already adapted to the dark. Besides, I was walking very close to One-Horn — close enough to see the wince on his devilish face when he'd corrected himself. So! I must have walked right into some Machiavellian games they had here. Never mind. It wasn't my problem, after all.

"Do they bring stuff over from Cesspit?" I asked.

“From everywhere. That’s the safest thing you can do here. No one’s gonna beat the crap out of you or rip your horns out for doing this. No need to bust your hump for the Syndicate and risk your ass doing their missions. Just scavenge some metal, cast a spell on it and smuggle it in through the Gate.”

I chuckled. “So that’s to whom we owe the scrap shortages in my home gulag.”

He didn’t say anything. He probably didn’t know what a gulag was, or maybe my jibe had hit home a bit too close for comfort.

In the meantime, we’d already walked quite some distance away from the refuse site. There were fewer lights here; the huts, too, were getting scarcer. Had I been paranoid, my alarm bells would have already been ringing. As Russian mafia guys like to say, you know you have a problem when you’re having a late-night drive out of town in another guy’s car trunk.

Still, the further we went, the less reasons there were to be cheerful. Judging by the city’s vague outline far in the distance, we must have already left it far behind. Ditto for the refuse site, the Kabirids, and Arts.

One-Horn was walking with his head lowered, casting occasional glances behind him as if to check whether I was still tagging on behind him.

“Is it far still?” I asked.

“We’re nearly there. Having said that, we can do it right here.”

He swung round.

The expression on his face made me quite uncomfortable. Putting it straight, it scared the shit out of me. Just for a change.

His face was distorted with hatred, as if I'd deflowered his Kabirid sister and slandered his father's name, then legged it back to Cesspit. Whatever the case, I could tell I wasn't flavor of the month. Which was a shame, really. I was a nice guy under my rough exterior.

"You must be mistaken," I said. "I'm a friend of Ufir von Urt. Your Master, as you call him."

"Oh no, you aren't. You're Serge."

"That's right. So what?"

"Sworn Enemy. It's because of you that our fraternity fell to bits. But I managed to catch one of your thief friends and made him squeal. He blabbed everything about you. It all came together quite nicely, don't you think?"

The thieves... my status as a Sworn Enemy... the screwed-up fraternity... All the pieces snapped together in my head.

The only thing that didn't fit was his race. Weren't they supposed to be Archali, all of them?

"You a Daggerist?" I asked in amazement, reaching for my sword.

"Why, are you surprised?"

"A little. I thought they were supposed to be Archali."

"Not all of them, as you see."

"Can't we talk about it?"

"I don't think so. It's too late for talking. Actions speak louder than words."

His eyes became bloodshot. His skin darkened. His nostrils flared; his torso puffed up. This was that racial ability they had, wasn’t it?

I reached out for my plasma gun and wiped the sweat off my brow with the back of my head. Never mind. Let’s see what you’re made of, Mister Dendroid.

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Chapter 10

EVERY ACTION HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES. At least that's what we were taught. If you touch a hot cooker, you're gonna get burned. If you take a knife by its blade, you might cut yourself. Simple. Whoever didn't learn the rules of the game in due time, will have to learn life's lessons by trial and error. And life is a tough teacher. It doesn't care for your emotional trauma. Sooner or later, but you're bound to learn. No exceptions.

It stood to reason that my association with orthodox thieves who exercised their activity in strict respect of the penal code wasn't going to make me popular all around. Which was normal: a group's resounding success in winning back an already occupied niche rarely leaves the other parties happy. And considering that we'd also managed to shaft the Daggerists in the process, this one-horned individual had every reason not to like me. Which explained why I assumed his attack to be quite warranted.

Still, I had no intention of restoring "proverbial justice" by allowing myself to be killed. Nor did I have any intention of studying his Dendroid abilities. I simply raised my plasma gun and pulled the trigger.

By then, the Kabirid had become as dark as a rotten prune, almost merging with the hazy gloom around him. Still, he quickly became visible in the brief flash of plasma. The shot swept him away like a twig in a tornado. He plowed through the ground on his back for a good thirty feet until finally coming to a stop.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 31.

Excuse me? This was all well and good but where was my PK message? As in, *you've killed a player who was, blah blah, please accept*

your reward? Was my interface busted or what?

Gripping the hilt of the sword, I slowly walked toward him. I was obliged to put my gun away because it was still humming as it cooled down.

So, where was that Dendroid dude?

He was lying flat out like a pancake. Which wasn't a problem. I wasn't that sentimental, after all. It wouldn't be the first time I'd had to deal a coup de grace to an opponent. Shame I didn't have an axe handy to chop him up for firewood.

By now, One-Horn was indeed beginning to resemble a felled tree. His skin had turned hard, dry and crusty like tree bark. So apparently, his bark was worse than his bite. Never mind. I used to have this thingy that could easily penetrate any defense. One moment!

I made an educated guess where his heart should be located, then brought my sword down on it.

Oh. This wasn't in the agreement. The sword really struggled to pierce the bark — and once inside, it remained firmly lodged, irresponsive to all my attempts to pull it out.

In the meantime, One-Horn wasn't in a hurry to die. Quite the contrary. He opened his eyes which now seemed to be ablaze like the flames of hell. With a cracking sound, he slowly reached his hand out toward me.

All I had time to do was give the Gramr another couple of impotent tugs before I let go of the hilt, leaving the blade embedded in One-Horn's slowly rising body.

Almost as an afterthought, I remembered I still had another trump card up my sleeve.

[∞]

Dammit! He’d already opened his eyes.

Hoping against hope, I tugged at the sword, already knowing it was pointless. I stepped a few paces back, watching the woody Kabirid scramble back to his feet. My very own Gramr was still sticking out of his chest. Bastard!

Now I regretted not having taken the easiest route by buying the simplest of fireball spells. Never mind. We’d have to work with what we had.

My *Ice Flourish* simply glanced off his skin — or should I say his bark. The Arc made him freeze for a moment — more in surprise at the flash of light which had sliced through the gloom than from any damage received. The *Electric Field* did a good job slowing him down — but it probably had more to do with the nature of the spell because it hadn’t really dealt him any damage. The *Bloody Whip* disappointed me the most, and after a few futile attempts to use it, I simply discarded it.

My Destruction spells barely had any effect on him at all. All they did was raise clouds of fine wood dust, chipping a few hard flakes of his bark-like skin, and that was the extent of it.

He kept walking toward me, unhurriedly but inexorably. I could of course loose off another dose of my plasma gun. But the thing was, I only had two charges left. Unless...

I could help you, if you wish.

I startled. The voice sounded loud and clear. And the worst thing was, I knew who it belonged to. It was my own.

What a disappointment. You'd think that when the going gets rough I could expect all my inner reserves to spring to my rescue. Instead, they'd chosen to manifest themselves in a bout of schizophrenia.

So I asked a stupid question — because not asking it would have been even more stupid. "Who are you?"

"I'm your death," One-Horn croaked, thinking that my question was aimed at him.

What a killjoy. Here I was, beside myself with worry, and he was only thinking about himself! He should be ashamed.

"You know the answer," the voice replied from within me. *"All your suppressed desires, fears, problems which you don't dare face — all of it has helped to shape me. Not the Avatars nor your sword. All they do is add strength, allowing you to realize that I actually exist."*

All this was cool, of course, but this wasn't the right moment to indulge in soul-searching. Right now, I was confronted by a Kabirid about to lunge at me and there was nothing I could do about it.

The only logical solution was to leg it. The only problem was, I didn't know the terrain. Having said that, I did have a map — but judging by the route which we'd taken here, he must have brought me here in a very roundabout fashion. If I bolted, he'd have plenty of opportunity to cut me off.

"How can you possibly help me?" I shouted.

One-Horn froze for a moment, probably thinking I must have gone off my rocker asking him for help, of all things. In actual fact, he wasn't far from the truth. Still, he quickly took stock of the situation and continued coming for me.

"I could kill him," the voice said. *"All you need to do is let me do it."*

“Yes! Yes, I do! Do what you want!”

It turned out to be incredible — so unlike everything I’d experienced before. It was as if some invisible force pulled me from behind the steering wheel and dumped me in the navigator’s seat.

It was weird to feel my mind separated from my body. Even somewhat uncomfortable and scary.

But the other me seemed to be perfectly at ease. He dodged the Kabirid’s lunge with remarkable agility. Which wasn’t such a great feat after all, because in his current lumber form the Kabirid was considerably slower than the demon within me. Even I would have been able to evade his attack.

But the demon’s next move almost made me cuss. He — or I, rather — produced a long pipe that the Pied Piper would have been proud of, pointed it at the Kabirid and pressed a small button on its side.

The whole place lit up, allowing me to see the loose gray earth reminiscent of coarse sand. I managed to glimpse every crack in One-Horn’s bark-covered body. The air filled with heat.

Bitter disappointment overcame me, because the other “me” hadn’t even done anything special. All he’d done was produce the *Raging Throat of a Dragon* out of my own inventory. Six charges — or rather, only five now, — and four seconds of firing time followed by six more seconds of cooldown.

Dammit! Why had I only thought of this now?

And it really worked. The Kabirid went up like a Molotov cocktail. Even after my magic flute had stopped dousing him with flames, our little cub scouts’ bonfire continued to illuminate the wastelands.

If only I could have muted his heart-rending screams, it would have been super. But before he died, he for some reason decided to shapeshift back — probably in an attempt to shed the highly flammable bark. I didn't work very well, filling the air with screams and the stench of roasting meat. Shameful though it sounds, it even made me feel hungry.

Then he collapsed in a pile of dust.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Dendroid. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained the Mechanic skill.

You've gained the Magnet spell.

You've killed the last surviving member of the Daggerists thieves fraternity. The Sworn Enemy title has been lifted.

Your fame has increased to 20.

Your name doesn't yet resound across the Universe. It's not often mentioned in the Central Worlds yet. Still, the rumors of a fair-haired half-blood Korl who can't be defeated in combat become more and more common within the Interworld Network. Are you sure you're ready for this kind of notoriety?

How interesting. This bit about the "last surviving member of the thief fraternity"... Apparently, my Archali friends hadn't stood on ceremony with the gang that we'd framed. Don't get me wrong: I didn't feel sorry at all for them. What I found much more surprising was the fact that the Daggerists had had a Kabirid in their midst.

Then again, why not? The sound of money clinking can be much louder than even the voice of racial hatred.

The other “me” bent over the pile of dust, rummaging through it.

Okay, enough is enough. Time to regain control.

Oh! It wasn’t so easy at all. I felt as if someone had buckled me up with a safety belt, immobilizing me, but had omitted to tell me how to undo it.

“Hey you!” I said. “Bring everything back as it was!”

“Why? I could do your job for you while you take a break.”

“If you don’t stop now, I’m gonna break something for you!”

My head was about to explode. My brain hurt as if I’d taken a big bite of an ice lolly. I groaned with exertion, trying to get back into my body. Come on, just a little bit more!

I opened my eyes. Still in disbelief, I tried to clench my fists. I was back.

Despite the terrible heat, my skin erupted in goosebumps. Sweat poured from my brow.

“I’ll be around if you need me,” the sarcastic voice rang through my head.

“Piss off!”

I sat like this for a few more minutes, my hands buried deep in the Kabirids’ remains, until I finally came round.

I wasn’t angry, just scared. Could I really be stripped of my identity? Could I lose the very person I was?

Honestly speaking, I wouldn’t want that to happen. I’d sort of gotten used to myself over the years. Don’t get me wrong: I wasn’t averse to change. I was quite prepared to better myself and all that. But I had no intention of losing myself as I knew me.

My recalcitrant fingers kept sifting through the dust against my will until they stumbled upon a heavy hilt. It took me a lot of effort to pull it out of the dirt and dust. The weapon resembled an elongated sword, big and cumbersome, with an impressive hilt and blade to match. It was also incredibly uncomfortable. I struggled just to hold its weight.

Dagger of the Thief of Atair

+20 to Short Blades

+5 to Power Strike

+5 to Stealth

+2 to Blocking

+ 2 to Resistance

Restriction: Only Kabirids

Never mind the fact that this monstrosity was supposed to be a dagger. It was the fine print in the end which set my hackles on end. Why only for Kabirids? What kind of racist behavior was that? What happened to the ideas of tolerance?

Ignoring the warning, I continued to balance the weapon’s weight in my outstretched hand. My Vigor immediately began to shrink — although

until now it had remained virtually static. I tried to take a swing with this “dagger” and very nearly dropped to the ground.

What a shame. If I remembered rightly, the Spear of the Krune Clan had come with no restrictions at all, unlike this stupid thing. On the other hand, if you don’t need it you can always sell it.

I slid the dagger away into my inventory and very nearly staggered under its weight. Wow. These Kabirids must be a hardy bunch.

I picked up the Gramr, finally free from the demon’s body, and put it away too, then kept rummaging through the ashes until I found a stack of papers written in a strange language. Some looked like letters, other like some kinds of reports. No dust at all. Either they didn’t trade in it here, or One-Horn simply hadn’t had any money on him.

What a meager catch. Nothing like the Horsemen.

I retraced my own steps, double-checking my progress with the map. I wasn’t in a hurry. For a start, I didn’t know the terrain and I couldn’t see jack. Besides, I didn’t know how the other Kabirids might react to my return. Arts was still there with them — while I’d just killed their boss, hadn’t I? So I still might have to convince them of my good intentions. I might look like a deranged lunatic who hears voices in his head, but at the moment I seemed to be pretty normal. Well, sort of.

Finally, I could make out the refuse site and the shadowy figures of the workers stalking it. Glory be to the Higher Demons! Much to my relief, the Kabirid slave drivers paid me no heed. I gave them a wide berth anyway, just to be on the safe side. Not to give them any ideas, if you know what I mean.

By the time I reached the huts, my heart was pounding. I checked the plasma gun and got my “fiery flute” ready. I also moved the Gramr to a quick-access slot in my inventory to make sure I could whip it out at a moment’s notice.

I’d hoped to sneak up on them unnoticed but it didn’t work out. They’d already been expecting me.

A powerful hand materialized from out of the gloom, grabbing my shoulder. There was no way I could wrestle myself free from a hug like this.

[∞]

I dodged to my right, then spun on the spot, whipping out the Gramr, and slashed out into the darkness. I heard something drop to the ground. The Kabirid screamed in such a horrific voice that all my hair stood on end, including my short and curlies.

A blinding light came on, followed by a second and a third one, until I was encircled by them. Blows began showering down on me, so powerful that my breath seized. My Health bar promptly plummeted halfway down. I’d have loved to rewind time, but where was I supposed to rewind it to?

My Dark side kept quiet just for a change. Which meant my situation was indeed pretty dire.

Still, the blows stopped as suddenly as they’d started. A coarse voice bellowed something in a language I didn’t know. Several pairs of hands grabbed me and dragged me back to my feet.

Or should I say they’d tried to, because I immediately dropped back to the ground.

“”Hello, Serge,” the same voice said, this time in a perfectly human language.

Squinting, I raised my head to the sound. It took me a good ten to fifteen seconds just to focus my eyes and realize that the towering cliff in front of me was in fact the very Kabirid I’d come here to see. Ufir von Urt

from the Krune clan, the father whose son I'd killed a while ago. And the boss whose employee I'd just seen off. How's that for a game achievement?

"Hello, Mister von..." my voice broke as I erupted in a bout of coughing up blood. Not good.

"Bring him here to me. And you over there, stop your screaming nonsense. Leave your arm where it is. You have citizenship already. We'll just file an upgrade request and make you a much better one. Just put a tourniquet over the stump before you spill blood everywhere."

They dragged me to one of the huts. No idea which one, but I managed to mark it on the map. If the going got tough, then I might check it.

The inside of the hut was remarkably spacious. It was half-buried into the ground, with the floor much lower than the entrance, allowing the Kabirids to walk around without stooping. It had no frills, just some basic furniture: a few armchairs, a table and a huge chest. The ceiling was hung with glowing crystals dangling from strong fibrous strands. I might describe it as an attempt at respectable poverty. Still, the fine gray dust raised by the Kabirids' hooves made me cough.

Much to my relief, Arts was sitting in one of the chairs. Alive and kicking, with no missing limbs. She cast me an anxious glance before jumping to her feet in alarm. Still, one look at Ufir coming in was enough to put her back in her seat.

Good girl. Nice to see someone here more prudent than yours truly.

The last adult member of the Krune Clan snapped an order in his own tongue. All the demons left. I doubted he was being over-confident: I had I gut feeling he could take care of himself.

"I'm glad to see you," he said.

Remarkably, he was telling the truth. My Observation Skills couldn’t lie.

Still, he frowned immediately after saying it. “But you’ve just chopped off one of my Kabirids’ arms. And you must have killed the other one, I presume?”

I nodded and pulled out One-Horn’s dagger, letting it drop it to the floor.

Biting his lower lip, Ufir ran his hand over his horns as if they were his hair. “I can’t say I’m too saddened by his death. But he had plenty of influence and quite a few followers. So much so that to tell you the truth, I was already regretting making him my assistant. So I’m afraid this puts you in a very awkward situation...”

“He attacked me.”

“Did you know him?”

“No.”

“D’you wanna say that a Kabirid attacked you for no apparent reason?”

“Actually, he did have a reason...”

It was a good job demons weren’t especially hairy — because by the time I’d finished my story, Ufir might have turned gray. The longer I spoke, the darker his face became, from a slight disbelief to a badly concealed fury. In order to corroborate my claim, I was obliged to produce the papers I’d taken off him.

If was then that Ufir started to slowly reach boiling point, until his already red face had turned almost burgundy.

‘He plotted to take over everything. And you’re right: he was indeed a member of the Archalus thieves’ fraternity. This... this is incredible. You’ve no idea what it means.”

Actually, I had. It meant that yours truly had just left the ranks of the ham-fisted idiots, acquiring a new title of “the savior of the Fatherland and this particular Kabirid in particular”. So I let Ufir vent his indignation at his deceased employee’s treachery and turned my attention to all the system messages.

You’ve helped the colony of Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan to prevent an attempt on its leader’s life.

You’ve received a new title: ***Friend***

Allows you to go unhindered in places which are the property of the colony.

You’ve helped the colony of Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan to prevent an attempt on the lives of their leader’s grandchildren.

You’ve received a new title: ***Family Friend***

Allows you to borrow the colony’s shared objects.

You’ve helped the colony of Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan to prevent an attempted coup d’etat and change of leader.

You’ve received a new title: ***Best Family Friend***

You can now count on the clan’s protection.

You’ve exposed a traitor within the Order of Trashmen.

You’ve received a new title: ***Frequenter***

Allows you to go unhindered in settlements, refuse sites and other places which are the property of the Order.

“Serge, you’ve just saved all of us. Can I help you in any way?”

I concealed a cunning smile by covering my busted lip. Admittedly, my whole body hurt like hell after the good hiding the Kabirids had given me. But overall, I was in a pretty good mood.

“To be completely honest, you could...”

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Chapter 11

IF YOU SET THE SAME impossible task to several different people, you can expect different reactions. A Japanese might try to politely divert your attention from the subject, just to avoid his having to say a straightforward “no”. A German might reply with a snapped “Nein!” and try to wrap up this pointless conversation. A Russian, however, might scratch the back of his head before offering something along the lines of, “We might need a bottle of vodka to sort this out.” In the end, even after having drunk it, he still won’t be able to help you, simply because you’re asking for too much.

These days, there’re plenty of courses around teaching you how to turn your life around and make the Sun orbit your own precious asshole. But even so, they try hard not to switch from theory to practice, remaining just a bunch of useless advice for virgin minds.

At least this was what I realized in the two minutes it took Ufir to answer my question. Just when I was about to believe that my problem was solved. Thinking that he might help me meet the right people who’d name their price (because money should never get in the way of a good friendship), allowing me to give Letraine the middle finger before heading for the Fourth Order. Okay, he wouldn’t be able to see it but so what?

“I’m very sorry. I really, really can’t help you with this,” Ufir finally said, unable to endure the silence any longer.

The respectable Kabirid did indeed look quite embarrassed. I understood him well. If the system messages were to be believed, yours truly had in his eternal kindness just saved Ufir himself as well as his grandchildren, then proceeded to catch a turncoat thief who’d teamed up with the Archali. Although I doubted very much it had anything to do with the Order’s activities (because they can’t have been all Kabirids there, so it

had to be something other than their internal racial disagreements) — the Game still must have had its own reasons for leveling me up. The fact remained, after all the good deeds I'd committed, Ufir still refused to help me.

As it turned out, he simply didn't have the right connections to smuggle anyone into Mechilos, human or otherwise. Why, may you ask? Because, just like many others, Ufir was too fearful of doing so. In theory, if a trespasser were caught, all involved would be stripped of their citizenship. But in practice, Mechanoid cops made sure that any renegade caught in action wouldn't survive the arrest.

In a way, it was even funny. Letraine seemed to have a nice little business smuggling people in — while Ufir here was quaking in his boots at the mere mention of it. The answer was, their influence levels were different. Why, pray tell, was Letraine so fearless in doing his dirty work? The answer was, he had all the right connections in all the right places. At least in all the lower echelons — but he could also have had some much higher-placed friends. You just couldn't tell.

"... so no one from the Order would bother to lift a proverbial hoof to help you. What I can do, however, is give you a little piece of advice."

"Which would be?"

"Krutniss' dagger costs quite a whack of money. But there's only one Kabirid who would go to any lengths to get hold of it. I'm talking about Luber, Krutniss' half-brother."

"Aha. I understand. Family heirloom and all that."

"Oh no. They couldn't stand the sight of each other. Krutniss was a famed warrior while Luber and his gang of Kabirids were one of the first to worm their way into the Tenth Order. By the time his brother had come back from yet another of his forays into Elysium, Luber had already joined the Order of Trashmen and made sure that Krutniss wasn't accepted. Seeing

that, Krutniss came to serve with me. But apparently, in Elysium he was a great success, and not just in battle."

"What's this Order of Trashmen? Could you tell me more about it?"

"Mechanoids are constantly in need of more metal. But they won't do the dirty work, of course. Why should they? They have non-citizens to do it for them. Who in turn have to be supervised," Ufir made an apologetic gesture.

I nodded. "The strong will always control the weak. Nothing new there. So how many gangs are there in this so-called Order?"

Ufir winced. "Not gangs. Colonies. The Order counts seventy-three Masters, six of which have the rank of Higher Master. You shouldn't be fooled by the Order's name. There's some very serious money being turned over there."

"That I can imagine. Where there's muck, there's money. That's not what I mean. My question was, do you approve of it?"

"Dust is still dust," he said with a funny shrug of his powerful shoulders. "Besides, all of my grandchildren are still Kabirids. One hundred percent. So they can't get into the Ninth Order at all. I'd like them to grow up first, and then... then we'll all move into the city. Here, take this."

He handed me a scrap of parchment.

Yet another map? I crumbled it, absorbing its contents, then checked my own map.

So! Now I had a much better idea of the real size of Mechilos. It was surrounded by a multitude of tiny colored dots which resembled microscopic swarms of bees. I could tell the position of Ufir von Urt — and a bit further on, there was a dot marked with the name "Liart", and then

another one for some guy called “Uberdale”. So many names, in fact, that it might take me a good half-hour to study the map in its entirety.

“This is the map of the Order of Trashmen. Down to the last man. It might come in handy.”

I nodded. “I’m sure it will.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you? Provided there’re no favors involved.”

“No, thanks anyway. I completely understand.”

“You could join me for dinner, if you wish.”

I was about to joke that I don’t indulge in “infernal barbeques” but heard an indignant chuckle deep inside myself.

Dammit! I didn’t at all enjoy sensing another creature’s presence within me — knowing that it fed on my own actions including even those it didn’t approve of.

“No, thanks,” I repeated. “We’ve got to be on our way. Thanks for everything.”

I couldn’t help but invest a little sarcasm into my words. This trip to Mechilos had turned out to have been pretty worthless. I’d wasted a rather valuable plasma charge for my gun, had the crap beaten out of me for my troubles; my nose was completely blocked with this omnipresent fine gray dust; and to top it all, I was dripping with sweat (but no one was going to force me to remove my trench coat now). On the plus side, I’d taken a tiny peek at the city from a great distance and had a rather unpleasant wander around the lands of the Tenth Order. So the grand total of our trip was all in all pretty negative.

Having said that, experience wasn't always supposed to be positive. This wasn't a Disney script, after all. I could reel off the names of a whole bunch of big businessmen who'd lost their empires several times over, only to get back to their feet and keep going. The latter being quite a challenge for me at the moment — literally.

Even though Arts had managed to stop the bleeding with her healing spells, she still wasn't a miracle-worker. She could only do so much. My chest was hurting so badly as if a bunch of Irishmen had danced a jig on it. My leg was giving me grief; the cut on my lip stung from the sweat. Which explained why I wasn't in the best of moods.

Ufir and all his subordinate Kabirids came out to bid us goodbye. All the grim stares and pointy horns were now replaced by friendly smiles. Even the guy whose arm I'd lopped off waved his goodbye with his bandaged stump. That's the power of Reputation in good society!

Arts was tactful enough not to ask me where we were off to now. In my personal view, Mechilos had now sunk to the lowest possible ranking, even raising that sad hole of Purgator up to two stars. Everything is comparative, so they say.

Our return journey back to the Gatehouse was uneventful. With one exception. As we'd passed a large group of trashmen, two of them asked if they'd seen us before. One of them even asked me if I was "that guy from Cesspit". I hurried to reply to the negative, then tried to drag my already-beaten up body away from them as fast as I could.

"What was that now?" Arts asked.

"That's my fan club."

"No, you don't understand. They do know you. We need to find out where this is all coming from."

“Do you need to ask? My ass had got a bit of fame attached to it just lately.”

As I told her the story of my upping Fame to 20, the expression on Arts’ face boarded on a facepalm. As in, “you idiot!” Yeah right. As if I could have done anything about it. It’s just that there’re some very unpleasant characters around who tend to attack you first. In which case, I just don’t let myself be killed. And that’s the extent of it.

“This is gonna complicate everything,” she finally said, not bothering to go into detail.

I, for my part, wasn’t in the right mood or physical state to ask for any details. We simply traveled back to stinky old Skirtsville which now felt like heaven on earth, primarily because of its reasonable temperature. From there, we went on back to Cesspit. I pulled on my warm hat, wrapped the trench coat tight around me and stumbled out onto Community street.

Gosh it felt good. There was a sun up in the sky; the outside temperature was quite comfortable, at least for a Korl. Talking about which, I’d just glimpsed Traug standing outside his house like somebody meeting close family off a train.

Upon seeing us, he jerked back to reality and rushed toward us. “Are you two okay?”

“We’re fine,” I replied. “Why?”

“It’s just that you disappeared. So I was worried. What’s with your lip?”

“Mechilos girls are a bit too much. They’re all man-eaters.”

“Please don’t mind Serge,” Arts said, unable to help herself. “The heat doesn’t agree with his sense of humor. It looks like it’s gone a bit sour.

Or it could be that whack on the head that he got. That could have had some effect on it too."

"Tell me about it?" Traug almost pleaded.

"Absolutely. Where's Litius?"

Litius turned up after half an hour, looking pensive and in a world of his own. I wasn't even sure he'd noticed us at first.

"What did you manage to find out about Mechilos, Lish?" I asked, taking the bull by the horns — or should I say, the cat by the tail.

"According to official sources, any breach of Mechilos' immigration laws is punishable by deportation and potential exclusion from entering the Tenth Order for non-citizens."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"All right. If you're not interested in official regulations, I did a bit of asking around among regular Players. Who, by the way, still need to be paid. I borrowed some money from Traug..."

"It was only three hundred grams," Traug said with a dismissive gesture.

"So here's what I found out by talking with them. Until very recently, there were four Players who did all the smuggling into the Ninth Order. I'm talking about Ingvie the Limper, Baarl, Lertha-er-Seth and Croito. I was obliged to go to Mechilos — which meant borrowing more money from Traug here — in order to find out what had happened to them. Three of them — Ingvie the Limper, Baarl and Croito — were apparently killed during their apprehension. As for Lertha-er-Seth, she went missing."

"Mechanoids' execution methods aren't something to look forward to," Arts explained.

“That’s if you can’t afford to pay them off. Then they’re quite prepared to close their eyes to your little transgressions,” I said, scratching my cavalier head. “Or maybe you need to be a Master to get away with it, I just don’t know. In any case, we don’t seem to be getting anywhere. Letraine might have been right, after all.”

“But going to Atrain would be just as unwise as trying to break any of the Mechilos laws,” Arts pointed out.

“I’m afraid, at the end of the day we might have to do both. Traug, how much money did Litius extort from you?”

“Not a whole lot.”

“Seven hundred and thirty-two grams,” Litius reported enthusiastically, producing a wad of paper covered in his meticulous handwriting.

“So! By the way, what happened to your own cut, Lish?”

“I-i-i have some close f-f-f-amily left on my home pl-planet...”

“Okay, okay, just forget it. You’re just the feline equivalent of a wetback.”

I paid Litius off, admittedly unhappy at having to part with such a large sum. Still, he was right: information cost money these days. In this day and age, I knew this better than most. You should be prepared to part with any amount for something you really needed to know. Still, dust was the last thing that interested me at this moment in time.

“I know I have no right to ask you,” I said. “If you say no, I’ll understand,” I paused, waiting, then heaved a deep breath. “But I really need to get to Atrain. I need to find the maze.”

A heavy silence fell. Arts peered at me angrily from under her knitted eyebrows, with a look that said, “You’re such an idiot, after all!”

Traug lowered his head, studying his boots. Only Litius folded his arms, apparently deep in thought, his whiskers twitching.

“We could try and get a map of the maze,” he finally offered.

“And that’s something we’ll have to do ASAP,” I said with a sigh of relief. At least one of them was still with me.

Litius nodded. “I’m gonna go to the Order of Travelers now. If such a map exists, they’re the ones to have it.”

“Would this be enough?” I asked, producing two kilos of dust from my inventory.

“Plenty,” Litius said, deftly retrieving the money.

“I still think it’s stupid,” Arts quietly seethed. “It’s sheer suicide!”

“It’s my decision,” I said, waving her objection away. This conversation was beginning to annoy me. And I really didn’t need to get angry right now.

“I’ll come with you,” Litius said firmly.

All of a sudden I got the impression that we’d landed in some sort of parallel world. Traug who was normally game for any kind of adventure — provided it didn’t involve going hungry — suddenly didn’t have much to say for himself. It was Litius — who was never the risktaker — who was quite prepared to put his head in the devil’s jaws.

I wasn’t the only one surprised by such a turn of events. Arts, too, cast the catman a quizzical look, looking for some kind of explanation.

Litius hurried to oblige. “Traug has a lot of stamina but he’s a bit slow. Arts is quick but hasn’t got the staying power. I’m both. If we have to drag Serge out, you won’t find a better candidate than me.”

Arts sniffed. “Why don’t you go to the maze yourself then, if you’re such an all-rounder?”

“That wouldn’t make sense. The idea of this dangerous voyage belongs to Serge. So if he doesn’t go, there’s little point in going for the rest of us.”

“I’ve no intention of having others pull my chestnuts out of the fire for me,” I told Arts. “So that’s how we’re gonna do it, then. You and Traug should wait for us here, to mind our backs, so to speak, while Lish and I take a quick trip down to the maze. We won’t be long.”

“Yeah right,” Arts said, sounding as skeptic as could be. “As long as you two remember you can’t make a mistake in a minefield.”

“Thanks, friend,” I said under my breath, shaking Litius’ hand.

He nodded back.

“Thank you guys,” I repeated out loud. “You’re all dismissed.”

In my hurry to leave Traug’s house, it took me a while to notice that Arts had been tagging along. She walked in silence, steadily keeping up with me. After a while, she finally spoke,

“Are you feeling better now?”

“I feel great. Like after a month’s rest at the seaside.”

This conversation was already annoying me. I sensed the strain in it, as if Arts had meant to ask something entirely different. Something like, “How are things with you?” And the worst of it was that we both knew it.

To be fair, I did feel a bit better. I hadn't received any serious damage anyway. No bones broken, only some superficial injuries. The quick heal she'd given me back in Mechilos and the natural Regeneration process that had followed had by now helped me recover somewhat — despite the pain in my chest and the difficulty in breathing.

"How are things with you and Julie?"

Aha, so that's what it was all about. I clenched my teeth, struggling to keep my cool without letting her know everything I thought about her. "We're fine."

Another silence fell. I was curious if she'd continue to tag along behind me if I swung round and started walking in the opposite direction.

A nasty subdued chuckle came from within me. Oh great. My anger seemed to be nourishing the already-well nourished wolf of fury ready to break free from my control. For the moment, he at least needed to ask my permission — "for the moment" being the operative word.

Some Players stopped as they passed us by, pointing their fingers at us. I wished I could break their wrists for such lack of manners. Preferably in three places, so that they needed some painful resetting. But the question was, what was this fuss all about?

"So how does it feel being so famous?" Arts finally spoke.

"Ah, so that's what it's all about."

"Twenty points fame is only the beginning. You should remember that this is your world. And your home town. Here, you'll always be in full view. Almost like a rock star."

"Does that mean it's time to start wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses?"

“Possibly.”

It was true that I felt a bit uncomfortable under all the curious stares. I wasn’t used to this sort of thing. I’d never been one to do pictures of my restaurant meals or take selfies of myself in mirror-lined elevators with philosophical captions. I didn’t even have Instagram, for that matter. I just couldn’t stomach any of those Insta cuties peppering their pages with high-brow quotes they’d borrowed from the books of long-dead philosophers. Had it not been for all the funny memes ridiculing them, I wouldn’t have even known they’d existed. And now all of a sudden I’d become one of them too.

I might need to hire a team of bodyguards to fend them off with a big stick. Having said that, here’s one of them coming. A Guard’s black mask flashed in the crowd, only to reappear very close to me as if he was capable of micro-porting in a way similar to Bumpkin’s.

I sensed Arts tense up. Strangely, the thought of drawing the sword didn’t even occur to me.

“Serge.”

This wasn’t a question but rather a statement. I nodded unhurriedly.

“There’s this girl who gave us a message from you,” the Guard said.

I mentally applauded him for realizing he couldn’t mention my sister’s name openly in this crowd. Even Arts can’t have realized what he was on about, judging by her furious glare focused firmly on me and not on him. She must have expected explanations about yet another mysterious girl.

“We’re prepared to grant you your request,” the Guard continued. “The person you need happens to be nearby. Still, I’d like to warn you that you can’t turn back. I’d advise you to think again, and think well.”

“I’ve already thought about it. This is the only thing I can do to secure my family’s safety.”

“Oh well. In that case, please follow me. Alone.”

I made a helpless gesture, letting Arts know it just wasn’t her day. For the last twenty-four hours, I’d constantly had to leave her behind here and there. At the same time, I felt some weird sort of relief as if I’d just managed to avoid an unnecessary confrontation.

Strangely enough, I felt quite comfortable in the Guard’s company. It was like heading for a couple of beers or going on a fishing trip with an old friend.

Still, the reason behind this meeting that I’d asked Lily to set up for me only served to destroy the old me even further, transforming me into a new powerful Player Serge who couldn’t possibly have any weak points.

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Chapter 12

IT'S TRUE WHAT THEY SAY that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Same goes for ugliness. For some reason, one and the same object or event can evoke admiration in some, horror in others, while yet others would just dismissively shrug it off. Because our evaluation of them depends exclusively on how we perceive our reality.

Ever since I'd become a Player, I'd been viewing everything in Technicolor. The sheer power of spells and my own omnipotence were enough to take my breath away. The multitude of animals I'd never known existed made me tremble in awe. Every Gate trip intoxicated me even more than alcohol ever could.

But if the former Light Player Serge was openly enchanted by everything around him, today's Dark Player Serge was much more skeptical about the world around him.

Besides, if you're only looking for deficiencies, you're sure to find them. Even in my dear home world of Cesspit, and especially if it's a Guard pointing them out to you.

I half-expected us to head for the long building next to the Sachem's house. According to my information, it housed the HQ of the Game police including their barracks. Still, the Guard confidently left the Community grounds, changing into civvies as he walked. He sent his easily recognizable robes down his inventory, replacing them with a leather jacket which admittedly looked a bit funny with dress trousers. And good trousers they were too — mine were not a patch on them. Together they created the impression of a college wuss trying to play a Hell's Angel.

Incidentally, his mask had disappeared too. I stared at his familiar regular features with curiosity, trying to work out where I knew him from.

“Don’t try to figure it out,” the Guard said, smoothing down his neat side parting. “This is just a collage of different faces. Mainly taken from TV commercials.”

“That’s right! You look just like that dude who advertises the reusable toilet paper,” I said sarcastically. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“It’s a bit like a hangout. Not all Players like to get together in the Community. Especially not those who’re trying to keep out of sight or those who have trouble with the law.”

“You wanna tell me that the Guards know of such a criminal den and do nothing about it?”

“These hangouts will always exist, anyway. You shut one down, and another one springs up. But it would take us more effort to infiltrate them in order to keep an eye on all the dubious characters. And it’s through them that we have access to much more serious criminals.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like a toad screwing an adder to me.”

“Pardon me?”

“Never mind. Is it still far from here?”

“No, it’s real close by. Here, take this.”

He handed me a balaclava — or should I say, a ski mask meant for real ugly people. “You’re too conspicuous. Put this on. This way you won’t stand out in the crowd.”

I was obliged to take his word for it.

By then, we were about four blocks away from the Community. Quite honestly, it wasn't that far away. I became really curious what I might find there. They didn't have a black market here too, by any chance? Seeing as I just happened to have a bit of money on me.

The layout of the joint was identical to that of the Community proper. We ducked into a gateway between two old houses and found ourselves in a small blind square lined with covered wooden stalls. Surrounded by benches, there was a bonfire nearby whose purple and green flames betrayed its magic nature. But what was even more surprising, the back doors of all the houses around it opened up onto the square. How funny. Their Commoner neighbors probably had no idea they had wizards and sorcerers operating next door. And not just any old wizards, but criminally minded ones.

"Wait here," the Guard said. "I won't be long. Try not to attract attention," he added before heading for one of the doors.

Yeah right. Very clever. A tall Korl in a ski mask can't attract attention, can he?

Still, funny as it sounded, he had a point. Once I'd taken a good look around, I realized that everyone here seemed to keep a low profile. Most passersby were either wrapped up to their ears in scarves or hiding their bodies under loose robes. Only a few Players sitting around the bonfire had their faces open.

Seeing as I had nothing to do, I took a walk along the stalls. Books, a few bladed weapons, some clothes and jewelry. The latter got me thinking. I could, in theory, drape myself with charmed rings and necklaces, raising my Health or Mana 200 points or so. Not bad at all. The only downside was, I might end up looking like a walking Christmas tree. Better give it a miss for the time being.

A skinny young guy caught my attention. He stood in the corner, tall and gangly. His development branch was apparently ***Emulator***. The lower

part of his face was masked by a bandana replete with a skull and crossbones. He was selling some weird-looking scrolls. They were almost transparent, not looking like spell scrolls at all.

“Hi,” he said, noticing my interest.

I drew closer. “Hi. What’s this you’re selling?”

“I’m selling knowledge. Free information for everyone,” he made a weird gesture: some kind of crossover between the Nazi salute and pulling the toilet chain. Strange.

“What kind of information?”

“Different sorts. These are blueprints for the Atlean crossbow. And these are the detailed instructions for Balodrian runes. I also have some spellcasting manuals. Basically, I can get whatever you want.”

“Why, have you got a scientific library card or something?”

He giggled. “Not really. I get them from their producers directly. From those who actually make all these things. I just pretend I want to buy them, take a close look and try to remember everything. Then I just say I’ve changed my mind. No one regards it as a problem. Then I go back and copy the scroll from memory. This is my development branch. That’s what it is, all this stuff here. Free information for everyone!” he shouted with another weird salute.

I winced. This didn’t at all looked like an honest deal.

Still, the Emulator didn’t seem to notice. He was apparently happy to find a listener, so he just kept talking.

“Unfortunately, producers aren’t the same these days. Before, there were loads of them, and they used to come up with some really cool things. Like Alkhram central smithy’s laser defense system. Can you imagine that

bastard stopped producing them? He said there was no money in it anymore. And he was really good at it — or at least better than average."

"Can't you see the connection?"

"Which connection?"

"You steal their blueprints, so they stop coming up with new ones."

"Oh please! If one quits, there'll be many others taking his place. If there's a gap, there's always someone to fill it. It's not theft, anyway. It's not like I'm stealing their pants or a sword or something. Besides, I'm doing it for the common good. Free information for everyone!"

"Okay, okay. If you say so. You'd better tell me if you have anything new."

"Loads. I've just come back with a really good haul. These scrolls here are from Purgator. You can have them for just hundred grams. You can take a quick look, if you wish. Those over there are from Mechilos. They're more expensive though."

"Wait a sec. I thought you said free information for everyone?"

"I'm sharing it with you, aren't I? I'm just charging a tiny percent for my herculean task."

"Sorry man, I think I'm gonna give it a miss. I'm not yet ready to sponsor your herculean work."

I really struggled to keep myself in check. I'd love to unleash my internal war hounds on to this hypocrite. Still, I had to keep my Dark side under control.

Besides, this wasn't what I was here for. So I simply reached for my Raging Throat of a Dragon and turned it pensively in my hands, trying to

visualize the whopping great blaze it would have made of these scrolls.

The sweet convulsion of an almost carnal anticipation ran through my body. My skin erupted in goosebumps. This was what you probably feel when all your innermost desires are about to come true. You've been craving it all along — and here it was now, right in front of you. All you had to do was reach out and take it.

I licked my parched lips and slid the Throat of a Dragon back into my inventory. That wasn't me feeling it. Not me at all.

To keep my mind off it, I decided to do something useful for a change. Like check out that Mechanics skill I'd received for the last Player I'd killed, as well as the Magnet spell.

Mechanics (Intellect). Allows you to manipulate all technical appliances as well as their separate mechanical elements. Your current level of Intellect allows you to open the two first grades of the skill.

1. Open: basic mechanism control (most common in primitive worlds)

2. Open: advanced mechanism control (most common in underdeveloped worlds)

Magnet (Mysticism). Allows you to attract any object of your choice. The size of the object and the spell's range depend on your current level of Mysticism.

Cost: 50 mana points

Someone touched my shoulder. "Are you deaf or something?"

I turned to the voice. It was the Guard, still in his regular Player's guise.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I just heard something that disagreed with my delicate psyche. So I’m just standing here trying to digest it.”

“You can digest it on the way. Follow me.”

One of the front doors opened into a narrow dusty corridor, its floors filthy with slush. The floorboards creaked as we walked past several rooms where all sorts of weird things were going on. I saw Players half-sitting in beds, their faces completely zoned out. Their gazes were so hollow they gave me the shivers.

“Dust junkies,” the Guard remarked, seeing the look on my face. “As Seekers, they’re finished. They don’t seek for anything anymore.”

Finally, we reached the very last room along the corridor. It was locked. The guard tapped out a fancy rhythm on the door.

A key creaked in the lock. The door opened.

The Guard slipped inside and motioned me in with an impatient gesture. We were expected.

Here, just as in all the other rooms, several unconscious bodies littered the floor. The Player who’d answered the door now stood next to it. Another one, at the other end of the room, was kneeling in front of one of the prostrated bodies.

He was the one I’d been looking for. A **Hedepath**. A short balding little man with a beer gut who looked like an insurance company accountant rather than the Guards’ undercover agent. Still, I of all people knew that appearances could be deceptive.

“Hello,” he said, getting to his feet. “And you must be Serge?”

I finally pulled off the wretched balaclava and shook his proffered hand.

“I apologize for having you brought to this kind of place,” he said, making a sweeping apologetic gesture around the room, “but we’re terribly short of time. My colleagues are a bit busy interrogating these people. Once they’re done, it’s my turn.”

“You erase their minds.”

“Or should I say, I take away any unwanted memories. It’s all done for the good of the Order. Now back to you. You’ve decided to make a very important step...”

“That’s right,” my voice broke. I was obliged to stop and clear my throat. “I would like to ask you to remove my parents’ memories of me. Both my parents’ and also my younger sister’s.”

He gave a sad nod. “A handsome woman, her half-blood Korl of a husband, and a young lady. I remember them. That night, I was working nearby. Okay. Now here’s a question I’m obliged to ask everyone. Are you sure this is really something you want? Because there’ll be no going back. From that moment on, you’ll forever be a stranger to both your parents and your sister.”

Pondering over his question took me a bit longer than I’d thought. Still, I replied in the affirmative. It was a wise step. The fewer connections between me and my family, the safer it was for them.

My parents, Julia... I was probably too much of a worrier, constantly thinking about what could happen to them. So it would be more logical to just disappear from their lives. Not easier: just more logical.

“Very well,” Hedepath said, slumping down into a battered old armchair. “This is a very finicky job which will require a lot of work on my part. I might have to see them more than once, because you’re not just some fleeting memory. They raised you from infancy, after all, investing their all in your upbringing. So it’s possible they might have some residual

flashbacks. They'll be brief, and I'll be keeping an eye on them. We'll also instruct your older sister to abstain from mentioning you in conversations. We'll have to work with your closest entourage as well, to make sure that no one reminds them of you. So let's just sit down and make a list of everyone who's in close contact with your family..."

*** * ***

This turned out to be hard. Disquieting even. The Hedepath turned out to be quite a smart individual. He paused now and again, giving me a chance to collect my thoughts. He chose his words very carefully. And he kept writing everything down.

That's what I call a professional. As it turned out in the end, it wasn't just my family that needed his attention but my whole inner circle. Eleven people in total.

According to the Hedepath (who never gave me his real name), he was going to take care of my family first, followed by my closest friends — sorry, Uncle Denis! — and finally, my workmates and such. The price tag was very reasonable. A hundred grams per person. But that was after the big discount that the guards offered me for preventing the Horsemen from turning the world upside down. At least I got something back for my trouble. This way I was promised that the Hedepath would have finished with my parents by morning.

Outside, the square was quite animated. Two fit young dudes were beating the crap out of the free information champion. They weren't in a hurry, investing all their goodwill into the task. I even stopped, admiring their skill. That's right, give him one in the kidneys. And another in his face!

The Emulator's head visibly jerked back from the blow. Not too hard but still. I was so enthralled at the sight of it that I'd completely forgotten to don my balaclava. Catching the watchful gaze of one of the Players, I

hurried to pull it back on. Sorry dude, you must have confused me with someone else.

I popped into the supermarket on my way home. These days I spent so little time at my apartment that I could have just as easily grabbed a quick bite to eat in the street or in the Syndicate. But leaving Bumpkin with nothing to do could backfire. The poor guy had already cleaned all the soot from my pots and skillets and cleaned the fridge to such an extent you could now sell it as new. He'd even wiped the insides of the radiators with a damp cloth — which for me had been nothing short of a revelation. You could actually clean radiators?

Overloaded with foodstuffs (literally, because I had plenty of space in my inventory), I finally stumbled back home. I unloaded all the shopping in the kitchen, took a quick shower, then slumped onto the bed to study the map that Ufir had given me — or rather, his updates to the one I already had.

I found the deceased One-Horn's brother. Ufir had been right: his colony was indeed one of the biggest in the Order of Trashmen. While I was at it, I zoomed in on the available section of the Ninth Order. Ufir hadn't lied: he'd indeed been to Mechilos. Which was no wonder, of course: as a Mechanoid, he was its citizen, after all.

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 13.

So! Apparently, you could get skills just for studying maps. Could I maybe request the data I needed from the Cartographers?

I tapped at the highest point of the city's pyramid. Now that was a thought. Depended on how much they charged for it. For some reason, I had a funny feeling it was worth it. I couldn't really rely on counting on Letraine alone. It would be like putting all my eggs in one basket. Of course we had an agreement which both of us were obliged to honor. But what would happen to us afterward? You always had to have a plan B in case of having to make a hasty retreat.

I spent the rest of the evening pondering over the future and trying to come up with potential scenarios. Bumpkin had excelled himself with a truly amazing fish pie which, by some miracle, I resisted eating all in one go.

Also, it only cost me one broken saucepan lid to bring my emotions back under control. Very well. The universe can count on me. I'd managed to restore my balance.

I can't say I was nervous when I finally went to bed. On the contrary: I had some very neutral dreams, mainly about raw sewer — and as every Russian knows, dreaming about shit means you're about to receive large sums of money.

Still, I awoke with a heavy heart. I sat up in bed, staring anxiously at my cell. As if anybody would call me!

I spent a good ten minutes plucking up the courage to call Mom. Finally, I dialed her number. According to the Hedepath, he always worked as a team. He did all the mental wiping while his boys took care of the physical side of things. Which meant that by now, there should be no trace of me left in my parents' house. Including my number in her cell phone.

"Hello," I heard her familiar voice. She sounded happy and cheerful for some reason.

"Hi... er, Hello."

"Yes? Hello? Can you hear me? What can I do for you?"

"I... I..."

"Okay, let me guess. You aren't going to offer me another low-interest bank loan, are you?"

“Yes... well, no. I’m sorry.”

Biting my lip, I hung up. I was choking on tears; my chest seemed to have been pierced with a steel rod. For some reason, all my old childhood resentments came back to me. When you’re so small and feel hurt for some reason, and you start fantasizing about what it would be like if you just died. Your whole loving family would come to your funeral, feeling so guilty they hadn’t bought you the ice-cream which could have saved your life. And you’re lying motionless in bed — such a sweet little boy, feeling so sorry for yourself that tears well up in your eyes.

Luckily, these stupid fantasies don’t last long. Your parents bring you the ice-cream in question... then again, they might not. Still, life goes on.

But now...

No, no one had died this time, either. Because I’d done everything to ensure that didn’t happen. No one was going to die: neither Julia, nor my parents, nor even my sister Darya. This was my conscious choice.

The problem was, it wasn’t that easy to squeeze the human being out of myself drop by torturous drop, leaving only the Player. Because a Player was only a function, not a whole person. It turned out to be much harder than I thought.

My phone began to vibrate. My heart missed a beat. Could it be Mom calling back? Surely not. By now, she must have forgotten everything about my call. She was probably busy making breakfast for Dad and Darya while scolding her for taking too long to get ready.

This was somebody else wishing to talk to me. A man — or should I say, a beastman.

I wiped away the tears and tried to level up my convulsive breathing. By the time I’d finally picked up the phone, it was already on its seventh or eighth ring. “Hi, Lish.”

“Listen, Serge. I’ve managed to get hold of a map of the maze. At least a part of it. They don’t have anything better, I’m afraid.”

“Good. In that case, we’re all set.”

“This statement, I’m afraid, is a bit premature. I’m still short of quite a few artifacts required for what I see as our recon mission. Still, knowing you, I have a funny feeling that you’re not prepared to wait another few weeks required to dot all the Is and cross the Ts.”

“Sometimes it’s good to be predictable.”

“For that reason, I conclude that we can set off for Atrain at any point in the foreseeable future.”

“Great. That’s what we’ll do, then. Get yourself ready. I’ll come on down to the Community.”

I hung up. I was in such a foul mood that I couldn’t have cared less whether I was going to Atrain or my own funeral.

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Chapter 13

IN MOMENTS OF DESPERATION, or just during hard times, one tends to find consolation in fantasy worlds. Escapism is everything. It’s no surprise that books, films and games on the subject don’t go out of fashion. On the contrary: the harder the reality, the bigger the need to escape.

The funny thing was, I was a living proof of this rule. I ran to the Gatehouse at the first sign of a problem, impatient to switch from my commoner problems to those of the Game. And it even seemed to work. In any case, it was better than just hanging around feeling sorry for oneself, contemplating all the alternative scenarios.

Litius was waiting for me by Traug’s house. And not just him. The entire tribe was there, all present and correct. Their faces were focused and serious. Arts was wearing warm new boots. Litius had got himself some funny-looking green bracelets. As for Traug, he was already clad in full armor; the only thing missing was a bundle on a stick.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I demanded.

“To Atrain,” Arts replied for everybody.

“It told them it was pointless,” Litius butted in. “This would make us too slow to retreat and regroup in case of an emergency.”

“I agree,” I said. “We’ll just die, all of us.”

“We could wait for you by the Gatehouse,” Traug piped up.

What was wrong with his face? I couldn’t really see it behind the closed visor of his helmet — but I could tell that his voice wasn’t as

cheerful as usual. Had I not known him, I would have thought that Traug was afraid, pure and simple.

“We could do it this way,” I said conciliatorily. “If it gets dangerous, we’ll let you know. You’ll be our cavalry. And once we get to Atrain, only the two of us will carry on. Lish and myself.”

Traug seemed to appreciate my answer. Arts, however, didn’t look happy. Still, she didn’t say a word. She just gave me that long look of a police investigator scrutinizing a drunken recidivist assuring him that he had nothing to do with the robbery of the liquor store.

So she just nodded. Good.

“Here’s the map,” Litius said, handing me a piece of parchment. “And your change.”

I was about to tell him to keep it, but the purse turned out to be surprisingly hefty, so I took it from him. Judging by its weight, this scrap of parchment cost Litius all of four hundred grams. I’d been afraid that it might have been more.

I crumbled the map in my hands.

Not much. Only a third of the maze turned out to have been explored. We had our work cut out for us.

By now, traveling between worlds had become just as mundane to me as riding an elevator. A portal to Purgator — so what? Piece of cake. And from there, you could jump directly to Atrain. Easy.

Admittedly, I was a bit economical with the truth. While the jump itself was by now nothing out of the ordinary, I still found it quite intriguing visiting new worlds. And in this case, the situation was made even more titillating by the fact that everyone and their grandmother seemed bent on preventing me from going there.

And so it happened that after a couple of portal jumps, I found myself at the Gates of this dying world.

“Wait,” Arts said. “Take this. If you’re in any danger, fire once in the air.”

She handed me her staff — the one thing she virtually never parted with.

Lesser Staff of Fire

Releases a fireball capable of setting your enemy on fire or dealing serious burns. Doesn’t affect creatures of the Element of Fire. Has a diminished effect on creatures made of dead matter.

Charges: 425/1000

Range: within visual range.

Note: the length of the fireball’s trajectory is dependent on one’s Shooting and Tracking skills.

“Thanks,” I managed, realizing there was no nice way of refusing it.

“And please be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Litius pointed out in mild surprise. “Behaving otherwise could considerably lower one’s chances of survival.”

When we’d finally finished bidding our farewells, Litius and I went outside. The local wind instantly tousled my hair; the skirts of my trench coat flapped against the rocks; a damp breeze assaulted my face, as if we were standing next to a warm sea. Which was possible. You just couldn’t see anything in the clouds of mist swirling far below.

The road made one full circle around the cliff which housed the Gatehouse before descending to the rocky “islets” I’d seen earlier in Rumis’ reconstructed memories. Because of this, neither Traug nor Arts could see us descend. Which was very convenient for my purposes.

I laid Arts’ staff near some boulders by the side of the road and weighed it down with a rock. Litius curiously observed my actions.

“If we land on our asses,” I felt obliged to explain, “I’d hate Arts and Traug to end up in the same shit. So I’m not gonna fire in the air.”

He seemed perfectly satisfied with my reply. He just waited in silence for me to finish the job, after which we continued our unhurried descent.

Even Litius with his feline grace trod carefully, choosing where to step — and for me, it was a hard act to follow. Besides, the nature of the terrain was a clear indication that Atrain wouldn’t put up with any mistakes. Cut into the cliff face, the road was quite wide but slippery, its surface worn down by thousands of feet. Considering the sheer wall lining the road on one side and the mist-covered abyss on the other, it completely dissuaded you from being in a hurry.

“When the first crack in the fabric of the universe had appeared,” Litius explained, “that caused the shutdown of the Gate in Tyrolt which is the nearest town. So all the Players were obliged to use this one. In those days, this road was so busy that it was impossible to pass each other, despite its sheer width. But gradually, it fell into decline. Everyone who could leave this world have already done so. The others chose to stay in Tyrolt.”

Finally, we emerged onto a large plateau and were now confronted by the familiar islets. From close by, these big chunks of rock seemed even bigger; the fog made them appear to hover in mid-air. A narrow rocky footbridge, no more than a couple of feet wide, led from the plateau toward each of them.

We climbed over to the first one. I turned back toward the cliff face, looking for the ledge from which we'd begun our descent, and waved to Traug and Arts. I even grinned and gave them the thumbs-up. As in, *everything's fine, nothing to worry about*. In fact, I wasn't at all afraid, just a little jittery.

I kept my cool as I walked up the rocky pathways. The mist concealed any sign of cliffs or other foundations on which these islets were supposed to rest. I even got the impression that we were surrounded by water. Big deal!

The bright-green grass covering the rocky surfaces crunched juicily underfoot. Very soon, my boots were sodden from the dew — but for some reason, I wasn't worried about it. I even had the thought that had this world been any safer, all Players might come here for picnics. This place was very attractive, even despite the fog.

In Rumis' memories, both the panther-man and his pursuers hadn't taken long to clear this location. But as for Litius and myself, it took us at least half an hour, if not more. Admittedly, we weren't running — to the contrary, we even tried to pace ourself in order not to walk into any surprises. Still, I'd expected us to reach the main cliff a lot earlier. Strangely enough, only its edge was covered in grass. Further on, the ground was rocky and barren.

With every new step, the cliffs lining the road grew higher until finally they blocked out the sky. Now I felt something approaching paranoia, imagining an enemy lying in wait after every turn. The rocks' unusual shapes seemed to take on the form of motionless Players. If before I hadn't paid any attention to the surrounding silence, now the echoing sound of my own footsteps made me hunch my shoulders.

Litius — who was now walking next to me and not in front — twitched his ears in alarm. Still, his face remained relatively calm.

I took out the map and started studying it. The visible part of the maze was slightly to our east. Compared to the distance we'd just covered, it was about the same.

Too busy studying the map, I missed the most important thing. Litius had disappeared. Having said that, his disappearance was only a logical reaction to a certain popping sound so loud and powerful as if an invisible shepherd had just cracked a whip next to me.

I startled, ducking, and raised my head, turning to the sound. I didn't like the sight of the three Players standing slightly aside. Especially considering that I knew one of them. It was the beastman known as Kraken.

[∞]

I made it — but still, I didn't quite make it. I managed to put the map away and raise my head just in time to see, as if in slow motion, that Kraken shot some kind of firearm.

Instinctively, Litius put his hand out in front of him to protect himself. Then he was swept away. One moment he was there, then he was sixty feet further up, collapsing lifelessly on his back — while I just stood there open-mouthed.

[∞]

Too slow! Much too slow. I almost managed to touch Litius. Still, it was only an illusion. He flew through the air and landed on some small rocks, his listless arms outspread.

How on earth?! How did that happen? I was the Time Master! I could always rewind everything and fix it!

I too was thrown aside so hard as if a landmine had exploded right next to me. It took me a few seconds to realize what had just happened. I'd been kicked out of my body — again!

Only now the Dark creature within me hadn’t asked for my permission. The entire range of dark emotions I’d just experienced had given him strength. Now it was him in control of my body while I was just hovering over it, observing the events from above.

My body instantly grew a layer or black armor. I froze, forgetting all about my mind being kicked out of my own body. Now wasn’t the right moment to sort out who was right and who was wrong. Objectively, the Dark “me” was a bit better at the art of combat.

In any case, whatever was happening was really cool. The armor kept appearing out of nowhere, as if growing over my body. It wasn’t part of me: on the contrary, I was part of it. Bracers, greaves, a breastplate, a gorget, a helmet... In less than two seconds, my opponents were confronted by a giant in a full set of black armor. With a barely noticeable movement of his head, he was already holding the Gramr.

Strangely enough, I felt absolutely no fear for him using my Leader skill. What I did have certain reservations about was whether he’d welcome the return of my mind back into our body.

Our? Dammit! Since when had I started to refer to this fake symbiont as “we”?

Still, I had no time to ponder over it because by then, I was looking down at the beginnings of a hearty scrap. And I still had the other two enemies to check out. Let’s see.

An Archalus Hitman and a wolfman marked as a Resetter. That’s right. It had been the former I’d seen the other day pointing his gun from the roof. Now I knew how he’d managed to escape: he’d simply used his wings while the latter had spirited Kraken to safety.

But that had been then. Right now, Kraken was busy trying to grab me rather unsuccessfully with his tentacles. Unsuccessfully because the

Dark monster in control of my soul must have dabbled in Mediterranean cooking, judging by his intention to make calamar soup for dinner.

In the meantime, Hitman put his “gun” back into his inventory and reached for some other fire-spewing thingy.

Resetter, however, did something rather weird. He broke into a run — not trying to escape as you might think, but heading directly toward “me”. No armor, no weapons, nothing. His sharp teeth were something to be reckoned with, of course, but they were little more than useless against “my” powerful armor.

I could also sense that the Dark knight within my soul was looking forward to their confrontation. I felt his ever-growing malice about to pour out.

This made what happened next even more unexpected. Resetter rammed into “me”.

I could compare it to a powerful tidal wave rolling over a tall, proud cliff, only to be absorbed into the sand of the shoreline — vanquished and pacified, but still obliged to repeat its futile attempt after a while.

Still, this particular wave didn’t get a second chance. Resetter was still alive — but the Gramr had already ripped through his gray hide and exited his broad back.

But this was exactly what you call a Pyrrhic victory — because the slain wolfman had still managed to touch “my” armor.

A Player in possession of the Resetter skill has just reset all your positive and negative Karma readings back to zero!

+1480 karma points. Current karma level: 0

It had all happened so quickly that I had to react on instinct. “My” black armor disintegrated, sending the other “me” plummeting back down into the void from whence he’d come and reinstating me back into my own body.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t too pleased with this development. Finding myself defenseless in front of a bunch of rather hostile Players was a much worse scenario that having to accommodate my darker self.

[∞]

Once again I soared through the air, observing the wolfman’s last steps. The other “me” was still inside my body — the difference now being, both of us knew the danger presented by the attacker.

As a result, the Dark “me” managed to change the angle at which the Gramr fell. Instead of touching his armor, the wolfman’s hairy hand topped with long sharp claw-like nails collided with the sword’s blade.

The wolf screamed, his wailing more desperate than that of his animal brethren when they howl at the moon.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 23.

The Dark “me” then grabbed the wolfman’s other hand and twisted it, throwing the wolfman over his shoulder. The werewolf hit his head hard on the cliff face, falling onto the rocks. Judging by how his scream was cut short, he’d lost consciousness but wasn’t quite dead yet.

The Dark “me” attempted to deal a coup de grace — but Kraken tried to rescue his partner. But maybe he’d simply got bored standing there doing nothing. A good dozen tentacles reached out from his sleeves, one of them gripping “my” leg.

The Dark knight swung round. Even through his closed helmet, I managed to make out his bloodshot eyes. He was a veritable God of Wrath

trapped in a half-blood Korl’s body.

He deftly brandished the Gramr like a crazed woodcutter trying to hack his way through a thick forest with his ax. Squirming tentacles dropped to the ground, only to shrivel up and disappear.

In the meantime, the Archalus Hitman had produced a small handgun, quickly loaded it, then fired. With an impotent clang, a small dart ricocheted off the Dark knight’s armor.

They were trying to immobilize me and put me to sleep! Or put me to sleep, thus immobilizing me. Whatever.

Most importantly, the closer I got to Kraken, the more agile his tentacles became. It looked like I could forget close combat.

What about my fire stick? It was far beyond its range. And the plasma gun? I couldn’t remember how many charges I had left.

In any case, the Dark “me” seemed to have his own ideas about combat tactics.

He slightly changed his trajectory, casting Combat Telekinesis in Kraken’s direction. The spell didn’t work — or rather, it didn’t have the desired effect. Although Kraken managed to dodge, he was obliged to draw his tentacles back in — which was perfect for a fast attack on the Archalus Hitman.

The Archalus fired his tranquilizer gun again, aiming at the joints of the Dark knight’s armor, but missed once more. He must have already realized that his pea-shooter wasn’t much use here because he began to retreat, drawing a small sword.

Oh great.

The Dark “me” must have thought the same thing because I heard a chuckle coming from under his helmet, which sounded rather like the satisfied grunt of a well-fed predator.

In his last attempt to get hold of me, Kraken’s tentacles ensnared my torso and my left arm. Basically, this was a stalemate because Kraken’s abilities didn’t really work at long range — and at short range, he wouldn’t let anyone near him. I figured that now was just the right moment to finish off Hitman. Then we’ll think what to do with their principal shithead. We’d have to wing it, I’m afraid.

Still, the half-blood Korl trapped in his black armor wasn’t really me — although in some sense he was. He’d already sheathed the Gramr, then reached out his hand, pressing his thumb to his index finger, then imperceptibly jerking his wrist up. Pure Spiderman-style!

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 15.

I didn’t need this message to realize that the new spell had had the desired effect. The Magnet had worked even better than necessary, snatching the sword out of Hitman’s hand. It flew toward me in a wide arc — but the Dark “me” showed no intention of catching it. He dodged its trajectory with ease, allowing the blade to carry on on its way until it lopped off one of Kraken’s tentacles, rebounding off his protection shield. The bastard had cast a Blanket over himself just to be sure.

Still, this had achieved what I needed. The Dark “me” wrestled himself from Kraken’s deadly embrace. In a few leaps, he was already standing next to Hitman who attempted to escape in one powerful wingbeat — but failed.

The Dark knight grabbed Hitman like a bag of potatoes and hurled him at Kraken. Literally hurled, like he was an athlete tossing a hammer. Kraken raised his tentacles, attempting to soften his partner’s fall, but ended up falling to the ground together with him.

By then, the Dark “me” was already bounding toward them. He was a real killing machine, that one.

Kraken even managed to shrug Hitman off himself and lift his head before he received a hearty whack in his gaunt face. Hearty being an understatement: a regular commoner would have had his neck snapped from a blow like that. His Blanket had cushioned it to a degree, but still his head jerked violently back.

But the other “me” had no intention of stopping there. His black-gauntleted hand began to flash so quickly that its movement had turned into a single blurred line.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 15.

I’d been right: Kraken had only had seven Blankets. He’d grossly underestimated me. Well, so much the worse for him. Just as I’d thought, the blow from “my” gauntleted hand on combination with Leader had proved lethal.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Kraken. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained the Tuition skill.

You’ve gained the Whirlwind spell.

The Dark “me” got to his feet and casually reached for the Gramr. With an apparent relish, he drew the tip of the sword along Hitman’s body, watching with pleasure as all the Blankets crumbled to dust. Finally, the sword touched Hitman’s body, leaving a bloody trail in its wake.

A gargling sound came from within the dark helmet: the satisfied chuckle of a hungry beast tormenting its defenseless victim. I got the impression that the Dark “me” could carry on doing this forever.

Very well. Time to put an end to this show.

“Enough,” I said.

Another happy chuckle was his reply.

The Gramr transpierced Hitman’s body with a playful ease. The Player spluttered blood.

The Dark “me” drew his sword the whole length of Hitman’s body to his chin, not even noticing the resistance of his flesh.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Hitman. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained the Ice Fetters spell.

“Not a lot,” the other “me” said pensively. “Let’s check out the wolf.”

“Enough!” I protested. “I want my body back!”

“The bastard’s escaped,” the Dark “me” said, ignoring me.

I turned my head to take a look. He was right. Resetter was gone. Litius was the only one lying on the road now.

“Give me my body back!”

“Why? I’m not sure you know how to use its resources to its full capacity.”

I tensed, focusing, trying to re-enter my mind — but it appeared to be protected, as if the Dark “me” was a powerful firewall and I a weak computer virus.

“You shouldn’t do that,” the Dark “me” said, removing his armor. “Be a good boy and don’t rock the boat. Let the bad boy have his way for a change.”

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Chapter 14

PEOPLE NORMALLY COME in two types. While the first one moans, “Where’s the world going?” the other type keeps it going, ignoring all the protests and objections of the former.

I’d have loved to count myself with the latter — but admittedly, right now I wasn’t. At the moment, it was the Dark side of me that was pushing the world in the wrong direction while I was reduced to the role of a tearful whiner whose opinion didn’t count.

“We could come to an agreement,” I once again ventured.

Darkie scoffed without taking his attention away from my interface. It was as if I’d just said something funny — and maybe I had. Whatever the case, he hadn’t stopped studying all the goodies he’d received.

Tuition (Intellect). Allows you to pass on your existing knowledge of skills and spells to other Players. Your current level of Intellect allows you to lower the cost of either skill or spell tuition 2 pt.

Darkie nonchalantly swiped the message away. To him, Tuition was a waste of time — probably because he was doomed to be a loner. The spells, however, did catch his attention.

Whirlwind (Mysticism). Creates a powerful turbulence within a 120 feet radius from the summoner. Might raise clouds of dust and small debris, obscuring your opponents’ field of vision. The said effect doesn’t affect the summoner.

Duration: 20 sec

Cost: 350 mana points

Ice Carpet. Allows you to cover small patches of earth with a thin layer of ice. Requires tactile contact to activate.

Range: 60 ft

Cost: 10 mana points

I made another attempt to sneak back into my body. Still, despite being engrossed in reading, Darkie was ready for it. In fact, he completely ignored me. I had to distract him; preferably, to confuse him. But how?

As had already become a tradition, it was my friends who helped me out. Or a friend, rather.

I heard a barely audible rustling in the rocks, followed by a groan. Darkie and myself turned to the sound almost simultaneously, studying Litius' body.

Thank God he was alive!

Apparently, my Dark alter ego was as surprised as I was by my friend's sudden resurrection. "Litius," he said, still undecided on what to do next.

But I already realized that this was my only chance to reclaim my own body: right now, when the other one was confused and his mental defenses were weakened.

This felt like trying to get into an old suit which you wore fifty pounds ago. The fabric was complaining, the seams were threatening to burst apart, and the shoulders felt tight as hell. Still, I got the impression that I just might make it. Not as easily and smoothly as I'd have liked but I was getting there. And once the Dark "me" growled his protest from within — within *me* — I realized that I'd made it.

I was sitting on the ground, wiping the blood dripping from my nose. Everything to please! And nothing to wipe it with, just for a change.

I didn’t feel that special. The Dark “me” must have given my body a run for its money. Who did he think he was, a Superman of something? And now I was paying the price. My whole body was shattered as if he’d run it through a meat grinder. It must have been the adrenaline and the cooldown that followed.

“Serge,” I heard from close by.

Staggering a little, Litius walked over toward me. For someone who’d just taken a powerful spell in the chest and who’d been dragged fifty feet across the ground, he didn’t look that bad. His fur was a bit ruffled and dusty, that’s all.

I wish I could say the same about myself. Okay, maybe not about the furry part but about my condition overall.

"What happened here?” he managed.

“Just a slight misunderstanding,” I said, getting to my feet and wiping my nose. “They asked me the way and weren’t happy when I told them I wasn’t from around here. Then they asked me for a smoke and my wallet, you know the drill. So I had to explain to them that I don’t smoke and use American Express.”

“How many of them were there?”

“Three.”

I gave him a quick rundown on what had happened while he’d been flat out. I wish I had his ability to faint like a myotonic goat whenever there was the slightest hint of danger — only to come round once everything was already over. The problem was, this wasn’t the best of combat tactics.

“Did you kill two of them?”

“That’s right,” I said, keeping quiet about my split-personality disorder. I needed to look into it myself first, in order to work out the best strategy. Because if I failed... I’d either have to bring my karma back up and rejoin the Light side — or get rid of my Dark Avatars once and for all.

“That would make you completely impotent,” came a voice from within me.

Dammit! I’d hoped he might need a bit more time to recuperate. In any case, I had no intention of chatting with him now. Nor asking any advice from him.

“You can’t just pretend that I don’t exist...”

“Come on, Lish. Let’s see what those dead dudes have left behind,” I said out loud.

Darkie shut up. Still, I had a funny feeling it wasn’t gonna last.

In the meantime, Litius came over to the two piles of dust which by then had almost disintegrated. He began rummaging through the first one. “Nothing here.”

“Nothing at all?” I said in surprise. “Not one gram of dust, not even a note? Surely he should have dropped a weapon or something.”

“Nope,” Litius said, climbing to his feet.

“Okay. Let’s check the other one.”

The second pile was more fruitful. To begin with, I picked up a small revolver.

Glowing pneumatic tranquilizer gun.

Used to immobilize small creatures. Highlights the victim on impact. Requires cartridge refills.

I discovered some cartridges in the gun itself. Four of them, slightly elongated and very similar to real ones. The difference was, I knew now that each of them contained a tranquilizing dart.

Energy stun gun.

Deals your opponent powerful stun damage without killing them. Available charges: 1/2.

Warning! The item is slightly damaged.

Flying Boots

+5 to Acrobatics

+3 to Athletics

+2 to Medium Armor

+2 to Indefatigability

For your information:

Wearing the item decreases the gravity of your injuries by 300% when falling from a great height or landing sharply.

Submission Potion

Submits one's victim to the will of the person who offers it to them.

Duration: 30 minutes

That was basically it, apart from a small scrap of paper covered in the purple ink script of the Archali language. Considering that my last Intellect upgrade offered an extra language-learning ability, I could sit down and study the language of the Archali this very second. But why should I bother, if I had something much better right at my fingertips?

“Lish? What’s written here?”

“One moment.”

He ran his eyes over the lines, then double-checked himself as if in disbelief. Finally, he translated it for me.

“Wanted alive: a Player known as Serge. A half-blood Korl/human cross, fair hair, tall, known in Cesspit and adjacent worlds. Entourage: a Korl by the name of Traug, a young human female called Arts and a catman known as Litius. Signed: Preceptor Illus.”

“Who’s this Illus?”

“I’ve no idea,” Litius admitted, “but I fully intend to find out.”

“One of them has escaped. He’ll report back to his boss that their kidnapping attempt failed. Which means they’ll be back.”

Litius nodded. “I think so too.”

“They only wanted to wound me, not to kill me. You can tell by the weapons they used. Take a look.”

“A tranquilizer gun is a human weapon from Cesspit. They didn’t improve on it in any way, just cast a Light spell on it in order to smuggle it through the Gate. Still, that’s a very expensive way of doing things. It must have cost them really a lot of dust.”

“Okay, we’ll sort it out. We shouldn’t forget why we’re here.”

I put all the loot away into my inventory, with the exception of the boots which I put on straight away. It was true that I’d come to love my old Boots of Solophon, and my feet had learned to appreciate them. But these new fangled things were considerably funkier. All I now needed was a pair of well-laundered wings.

Our further advance was so slow and careful as if I’d just undergone a major surgery, with Litius by my side doing his best paranoid scaredy cat impersonation. You could understand him, I suppose. No one would be too eager to receive another shot in the chest from that monstrosity.

But as my favorite saying goes, even the longest day has an end — and in our case, we celebrated it by finally reaching the entrance to the maze. Interestingly, we hadn’t met a single Player on our way here. And this was supposed to be the only road leading to the city that Litius had mentioned earlier. Not a very good sign, to be honest.

Still, by then we’d already turned off the road and squeezed our way through the tiniest of passages half-buried under the fallen rocks.

The structure before us resembled some long-abandoned ancient ruins. Its walls were the only things that still remained intact in their indestructible rigidity. They were topped with a barely noticeable thick silvery cap of some spell. I couldn’t remember seeing it in my “memories”.

“Lish, what’s that?”

“It’s probably the rune of Repulsion which restricts access from above. Or it could be a spell, but I don’t think so. Spells aren’t as stable, you see; they require huge infusions of energy. This maze must have been built really a long time ago when Players had only just started to arrive in this world. Its purpose is as clear as mud.”

“Let’s not bog ourselves down with any philosophical mumbo jumbo. We’ve got to find that idiot’s body. I suggest we keep to the left. The map has fewer blank spots in that direction, anyway.”

“There’s an easier way. Didn’t you say that the guy who tried to escape was a beastman?”

“A panther-man.”

Litius nodded. “Excellent.”

He walked over to the maze entrance and threw his hands up in a commanding gesture like a conductor in front of an orchestra. He then lowered his hands, pressed them to his chest and thrust them out in front of him.

An azure wave spread through the air, momentarily illuminating the towering walls.

Litius slumped to the ground and sat cross-legged, studying the maze’s numerous exits. “This spell is called Summoning the Fallen Kinsfolk. Many of us tend to think it useless. There’s nothing your summoned family can do to protect you. They’ll only be in your way. Their ethereal shadows will continue to haunt your path for quite a while. This particular spell is normally only used by treasure hunters.”

“I think I got it.”

“That’s right. Let’s just hope that this panther-man hadn’t wandered off too far into the maze before he died. Otherwise...” he cut himself short, looking at the translucent figure of a rhinoman who’d turned toward us from one of the corridors.

Clad in massive armor, the impressive ghost lagged an enormous mace behind his back. The only thing that some people might find off-putting was the fact that half his face was missing. Someone or something

had apparently been strong enough to rid him of this not so insignificant part of his head, turning a perfectly alive rhinoman into a relatively dead one.

He was followed by more maze dwellers. A wolfman with all his four limbs chopped off; a jackal with two darts peeking out of his chest; a croc with a badly deformed skull which had been squashed into his body... The sight wasn’t for the faint-hearted.

More ghosts kept arriving, crowding the place out; they stood looking patiently at their summoner, apparently not in a hurry to leave. Alfred Hitchcock, eat your heart out.

“Are there any restrictions on the number of summoned kinsfolk?” I asked, trying not to look around me.

“Twenty,” Litius replied calmly.

He didn’t even stutter! Then again, why should he if I was about to do the same? I’d be sure to start if I saw another couple of beastmen with broken necks or deformed torsos.

“Is it him?” Litius asked, interrupting my musings.

I took one glance at a panther-man staggering toward us. “Yes, that’s him.”

To say we were in luck would be an understatement. It took me a split second to identify him. The panther-man’s face was intact, which was something I couldn’t say about his broken leg. His chest too was a bit out of its usual shape. Never mind.

“This is where he came from,” Litius said, pointing at the fourth corridor down from us as he climbed back to his feet.

I followed Litius. The dead did the same. We made a rather spooky procession, I can tell you. Although my rational mind kept telling me that they were long deceased and couldn’t hurt me, my heart still beat somewhat faster. My skin erupted in goosebumps as if I was freezing. I wished I could have Litius’ presence of mind.

In the meantime, Litius turned into the corridor and walked calmly down it as if on his way home. I understood, of course, that there was nowhere else for us to go — but the very presence of all these ghosts in the maze was a clue in itself.

Or at least this was the conclusion I came to as I tripped over the first pile of rusty weapons: all that was left of some hapless Player.

“Wait up,” I said, not yet realizing what it was that had caught my attention.

I double-checked the corridor and the rusty loot. Then it clicked. One of the rocks littering the floor was a bit too conspicuous for comfort.

“If you step on it, you might set off a trap,” I told Litius.

“I think you’re right,” Litius replied, sitting back down.

“And still I don’t understand.”

“What exactly?”

“My Observation Skills can only be applied to living beings and natural objects. I didn’t select items made by sentient beings, human or otherwise. Which might mean that—”

“That neither this rock nor the maze itself were made by sentients.”

“Then who made them?”

Litius shrugged. I got the impression that he'd had some kind of hunch which he didn't want to share with me for some reason.

I raked through the rusty loot. Nothing worth mentioning. Time had done a good job on these weapons, and whatever had survived its test had ended up in the hands of Players who'd ventured further into the maze.

"Let's go," I told Litius.

We next had to stop at a large fork in the road. Litius cast his spell again. The ghosts that were following us promptly vanished, only to reappear moments later. This time, the order of their arrival was different. For instance, our panther-man came with the middle group and not with the last one.

We came upon the next fork in the path relatively quickly — but, despite its proximity, it met us with three more mournful piles of loot: all that was left of more hapless Players. Here too, their remains turned out to have been picked clean.

"I'm gonna run out of mana pretty soon," Litius warned me. "We'll have to take a break and restore."

"We still have time."

As if ridiculing my words, the universe reacted in its typically sarcastic manner. I heard the disgusting sound of ripping paper coming from above. The sound of it seemed to fill the entire place — but still I realized clearly that its source was far away from here: probably, in the canyon itself.

Litius, however, was clearly petrified. He shrank his head in his shoulders like a cat caught with the proverbial cream, apparently unsettled.

"Litius, just cast your spell! There's no time to lose!"

“B-b-but how do you want us to g-g-get back? The sound is c-c-coming from the canyon!”

“I already worked that out. It doesn’t mean that whatever it is would come here after us. Remember what the panther-man did? When he heard the *sound*,” I said, stressing the word, “he beelined straight for this place. It can’t have been for nothing. Now cast it!”

Once again the ghosts “resurrected”, staggering toward us from every corner of the maze: long slain and raised from the dead by the spell’s deceptive power. They ambled unhurriedly as if they’d been doing this every day and were by now thoroughly fed up.

Only now they didn’t scare me any longer. The sound had seemed to have died down a bit but that hadn’t made it any less frightening, making me realize the truth of the old adage: one should fear the living, not the dead.

The panther-man limped in fourth this time. As soon as we saw him, we simultaneously darted into the corridor we needed — and immediately paid the price. A huge sharp blade whipped out of the wall, lopping off my arm and severing part of Litius’ face.

[∞]

“No, wait!” I snapped at Litius.

I patted down the wall until I discovered a barely noticeable translucent thread stretched across our path at shin height. Drawing the Gramr, I gingerly cut through it.

Just as I’d thought. The scythe-shaped blade shot out of the wall, disappearing onto the wall opposite. The two severed ends of the thread reached for each other, as if guided by some miraculous force, and fused back together. I’d seen all kinds of sorcery by now, but this thing was impressive in its simplicity and efficiency.

“The traps are charmed,” Litius pointed out. “I noticed the blue aura surrounding the blade’s edge. It’s probably capable of disabling physical defenses.”

“Considering all the dead Players we’ve seen, you might just be right. Let’s go.”

I stepped over the thread and motioned for Litius to follow. He was far from stupid — ask his development branch if you don’t believe me, — so he followed my example in silence.

Just in time, because the Sound went off somewhere very close to us. According to my estimations, it must have been somewhere close to the maze entrance.

I checked the map. Oh wow. We’d long left the explored part of the maze. If the parchment was to be believed, we were now almost at the center.

“Keep going, keep going!” I repeated, literally dragging the petrified Litius behind me.

That’s when I noticed another neat pile of loot at the end of the long corridor. A pang of premonition pierced my chest. And I knew better than to disregard it.

I let go of Litius and hurried on, almost breaking into a run. Now. What might have caused the panther-man to die here, of all places?

I cast a quick glance over the rocks. Nothing here to go on. Only the cobwebs. I hadn’t seen them here before. And now they were blocking the entire passage — there was no way you could get past without brushing it.

I whipped out my sword and hacked through them.

Bam!

That was a sharpened log ram — also enveloped in the blueish aura — that jabbed out of the wall.

Oh well. At least now I knew how the panther-man had died.

I bent over the pile of loot, studying it.

$*#)%&@%)#$#%.

I turned the piece of parchment around in my hands. No points for guessing this was a map of the maze, covered in notes in a strange language. All the paths on it led to the center, including the one taken earlier by the panther-man. Did that mean that he knew where he was going?

What else? Dust. A lot of it. 1314 grams, to be precise. I could bet my bottom dollar he'd been robbing the corpses on his way here. Still, what did I care? Possession is nine points of the law.

Unfortunately, his clothes had long turned into unusable rags. The boots I could try to restore, I suppose, but seeing as I had a brand new pair already, I chose to ignore them.

Rusty Battleax for Fierce Slashing

+ 3 to Slashing Weapons

+ 2 to Indefatigability

+ 2 to Blocking

Methinks that it had seen better days — but time and rust had lowered its characteristics. Never mind. It's not that I really needed it.

Because I’d already found what I’d come here for.

The Inturia of the Astral Sky

@(%&!#%#$!*

I picked up what looked like a hefty lump of cold metal which must have once been molten, then solidified into a complex, fancy shape. It was so white that it hurt my eyes to look at it.

Predictably, its stats were hidden. Not that I really needed to know them. I’d found what I’d been hired to find. All I had to do now was to deliver it.

Still, my joy didn’t last long. As soon as I turned to Litius, my face fell as I discovered several things at once.

Firstly, he was still standing where I’d left him, only now he appeared even more frightened than before. Secondly, there was a bright gap in the air between us, as if someone had just ripped the fabric of our world open from within.

And thirdly, this someone was now trying to get out.

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Chapter 15

ONE CAN BE AS WISE AS AN OWL and still lose everything to a most stupid blunder. You can speak a thousand languages but still be unable to express your needs to, say, a Martian. You can fearlessly defeat all kinds of monsters in combat, only to freeze in awe in front of a new and yet unseen creature. In a nutshell, you can't be prepared for every little thing.

That's probably why the sight of the pale tentacles reaching out from the gap in the air caught me by surprise.

It took me a moment to realize they were fingers on the mysterious creature's hand.

The familiar sound of ripping paper brought me back to my senses, making me realize that this was indeed the fabric of the universe being torn apart from the inside, for want of a better word.

Using my moment of hesitation, my Dark alter ego decided to jump at the chance once again. My head buckled under the strain, to the point where I was risking to end these mind games with a very real threat of a stroke.

Still, this time I got away with it. The other "me" must have realized that he'd missed out. Without saying a word, he quietly scuttled off to the bottom of my stomach. Where, if you asked me, he actually belonged.

As soon as Litius spotted the "alien", he darted off at a speed which would have made any eater of cat food proud. I couldn't blame him. Had the maze exit not been blocked, yours truly would have done the same. But as it was...

I hurried to open the map. The nearest fork in the maze which could lead me to the right corridor was almost at the center. So that's where I had to go.

In the meantime, the monster had already squeezed itself halfway through the gap. The sight made me realize one simple thing: I really didn't look forward to meeting him.

You could say, I suppose, that he — she — it — was remotely humanlike. As in, very remotely, provided you were pissed out of your head and myopic to boot. Admittedly, he did have two arms ending in long cable-like fingers which were constantly restless and fidgeting. His massive hairless skull was elongated; no sign of body hair anywhere. Returning to the matter of his head, the strangest thing about it wasn't even his huge nose which resembled the flattened snout of a pig; it was his mouth — or rather, the absence thereof.

He did however, have an excuse for a chin albeit not the chiseled Scandinavian type. His was rather weak and tiny, as if he belonged to some degenerate alien species. And no mouth at all.

As soon as the creature crawled halfway through the gap, everything clicked into place in my head. My first impression was that his belly was covered in scars. Still, this illusion disappeared as soon as he greedily sniffed the air. His large filmy eyes grew even larger; his belly began to ripple. And then...

Then, like the petals of some monstrous flower, his belly opened up a crack, revealing a jawful of sharp teeth within.

Now I knew it was time to leg it. Preferably now, before his mouth a.k.a. stomach decided to take a taste of me. Quite a revolutionary design, if you ask me, but wouldn't it lead to some digestion problems?

So I ran, heading in the very same direction as the deceased panther-man had before me. I just hoped he'd had some sort of plan, because I

legged it on instinct, unthinkingly, in the best traditions of Forrest Gump.

As I turned a bend, I managed to sneak a peek back. By now, the monster was almost out of its hole. Its long bent leg was sticking out in its entirety. The interesting thing was, it didn't place all its weight on its entire foot but only on its toes.

But at least now I could get a good idea of the whole thing. It stood about a head and a half above me, with huge eyes, long arms and even longer constantly twitching fingers. Its body was a milky-white color, prompting a comparison with a jellyfish. Plus, it had a mouth in place of its belly button. No idea what this kind of race was called, but I personally marked it down as "unfathomable shit".

Still, I had to give him his due: he was remarkably fast. I was already a good fifty feet down the long corridor when he started after me.

His splayed cable-like fingers took hold of the walls. With a powerful kick, the creature bounded so far that he almost caught up with me.

Instinctively, my hand reached into my inventory, closing around the first thing I chanced upon, which was the tranquilizer gun.

Four shots slowed him down for a couple of seconds. The darts sank deep into his pale flesh.

I reached for the plasma gun. Take that, you bastard!

The corridor shuddered from the thunderous discharge. The shot threw the monster all the way back to the far wall.

That'll teach him. He should have known better than pick fights with the nasty old Serge.

Still, my triumph was short-lived. Once again his cable-like fingers flicked into motion, pushing against the floor and forcing the creature back

to his feet. What I liked even less, his mouth was now open to its full capacity, silent and predatory. This is how feral dogs attack their victims, going for their throats without a single bark.

I couldn’t take my eyes off his sharp teeth oozing with spit.

Die already, you bastard! I flung the plasma gun back into my inventory, replacing it with the energy rifle. Basically, it was just a glorified piece of steel pipe with a small butt and a trigger.

As soon as the monster went for me, it received a broadside straight into his gut — or his mouth, whatever. Still, this time he wasn’t thrown back. He simply hunched up and leapt toward me.

I ran for my life like the last of the Mohicans, grabbing the now-useless rifle in my hand. I was lucky in that the corridor began to meander which slowed the monster down considerably. The walls shuddered from the impacts where he must have failed to negotiate the bends.

Then my luck came to an end. The corridor became as straight as a die again, revealing a low dusty pedestal. As far as I could tell, this was the proverbial heart of the entire maze. At least I could see five more corridors meeting here.

Ignoring the spell that protected the maze, the creature landed by the very base of the pedestal. I’d totally missed the moment when the noise of the chase behind me had died down. He sure could jump, this one!

Now we were running toward each other: he with the clear intent to devour me, and I because the momentum kept dragging me on.

The pale cables stretched, winding themselves around first my shoulder and then my arm. He jerked me forward, throwing me off balance.

Then I had an epiphany.

[∞]

I ducked as I ran, then dragged my fingers over the dry paving stones.

The Ice Carpet spell exceeded all my expectations, covering the tiles underfoot with a thick crust of ice all the way to the pedestal.

The monster slipped and was obliged to hold on to the walls with his cable-like fingers. Which was exactly what I needed. I was skating on my knees like a rock star; the only thing missing was a guitar in my hands. What I did have, however, was the spent rifle — which I used to poke the creature in his gaping mouth.

That’s when he screamed: a shrill, disgusting, saliva-spitting scream which almost turned his innards inside out, exposing all of his crooked yellow teeth.

I bet he didn’t like it. Try to give yourself a whack on the root of your mouth with a teaspoon. This was more or less what he felt right now, bracing himself against the walls and trying to digest the wretched steel pipe.

I topped it up with a Combat Telekinesis albeit without much success. Gradually I began to realize that this creature was apparently immune to any weapons or Destruction spells. So how on earth was I supposed to kill it?

Thus ruminating, I slid all the way to the pedestal and promptly got back on my feet. Now, what was I supposed to do? I could make out some inscriptions in a strange language — but no sign of any goodies like artifacts or whatever.

What the hell? Where was my prize for completing the maze? Especially because the monster had managed to turn round, still holding on to the walls with his cable-like fingers and trying to creep ever closer to me, although somewhat slower than before.

Dammit! I angrily slammed my fist on the pedestal — and dropped into a dark void.

The realization of what had just happened came to me a few seconds later, after I'd pancaked onto a cold floor, striking my knee hard in the process.

Aha. By touching the pedestal, I must have apparently triggered a trap.

I rolled over the floor, drawing the Gramr — because I knew that the monster could have followed me down here. Still, the place was empty. Or rather, I could still hear the same nasty scream I'd been trying to flee all along — but I couldn't see the creature that produced it. Also, the sound itself was much softer as if it was coming from afar.

I waited on my backside for a little while before finally scrambling to my feet. My Health bar twitched and emptied halfway, even though I couldn't detect any apparent damage to my body.

From what height had I fallen? And what would have become of me had I not changed into my new boots?

Without sheathing the Gramr, I cast Light and limped gingerly forward.

The corridor here was very similar to the one in the maze, the only difference being that its ceiling was formed by a huge irregular slab of stone. As I took in the sheer width and height of this place, I gathered that it must have been the den of some ancient giants.

Pretty soon I emerged into a spacious hall — which was the weirdest place I'd ever seen.

Its floor was divided into what I'd describe as "pedestrian crossings", lined by long thin gutters which were filled with something. I lowered my fingers into the liquid to smell what was flowing in them. Oil?

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Olfactory ability.

Yeah yeah. Once again I cursed myself for not having learned a single fire spell yet. I flicked the oil off my fingers and reached into my inventory for my **Throat of a Dragon**. It was a bit wasteful to use such a powerful artifact just for lighting the place up. A bit sacrilegious, like lighting a cigar up with a hundred-dollar bill. Then again, they say that Pablo Escobar had burned two million dollars in an attempt to keep his little daughter warm while hiding in a hut. Was I any worse than that?

The blaze was such that I squeezed my eyes shut after the prolonged darkness. Still, my plan had worked. The flames crept up and down the gutters, coming together and spreading out through the whole hall.

By the time the Throat of a Dragon expired, there was enough light in the room to reveal a tall column at its center — and behind it, a broad wall gaping with three dark passages. There was an inscription above each of them — the problem was, I couldn't figure out the language.

I walked up to the wall, marveling at all the scribblings. This definitely wasn't the language of the Archali, because I'd seen some of that only just recently, in that note that Litius had showed me. But it also wasn't human. That was the extent of my linguistic education.

Just in case, I opened the Linguistics tab — and my heart missed a beat.

The list of racial semiotic systems you have come into contact with:

Humans

Archali

Korls

Beastmen

Kabirids

Abbases

Purgatorians

Iorolfs

Orcs

Original Beings

I wasn’t surprised by the addition of the Iorolf race to the list. I’d met Orael, after all. It was the mention of the “Original Beings” which flummoxed me. Had I been blessed by coming across some of them? I’d only met one weird creature just lately, which was this cable-fingered monster. Could he really be an Original Being?

The very thought made me sick to the stomach. That made sense. It also meant that the reason that no one knew their language was because no one had survived the encounter.

I pressed on the last line:

The semiotic systems selected: humans, Original Beings.

It did work, after all. Not completely, but still. Now I could tell that the inscriptions on the wall were written in two languages. Those on top where neatly chiseled one-liners; those below them appeared to have been scribbled in a hurry. These, funnily enough, I could understand.

Death... Devour everyone... Bearers of white death... Find... Hide...

How very meaningful.

I drew closer to the three entrances. Flickers of light already danced inside: apparently, the gutters reached this far. Okay, let’s take a look.

In fact, it turned out to be quite disappointing. Each passage ended in a room, as simple as that. Some of the rooms were bigger, others smaller. Of course, they were quite impressive considering my human size — but still, I’d expected to find some treasures in them at the very least.

The middle room was also the smallest. It was more of a crypt, really, lit up by a row of empty closed sarcophagi which lined its walls. The reason I knew they were empty was because they all had holes in them. At least twelve big holes in each, so wide you could put your hand through it. Very strange.

The room on the right was more of a giant hall, considerably bigger than the first one. Its walls were covered in pictures depicting a whole bunch of dudes in full knights’ armor, fighting each other. I also discovered several weapon racks, rather shabby and dusty, looking so ancient as if they might fall apart with a single touch. There were also a couple of elevated platforms and a whole lot of wide benches.

The last room, however, proved to be the most interesting. Although still giant for me, it was tiny compared to the two others. It was a foundry, complete with bellows, huge tongs so heavy I couldn’t even lift them, and some impressive hammers.

But most importantly, I found some small chips of white metal there, identical to the one I had.

The Inturia of the Astral Sky

@(%&!#%#$!*

So the panther-man must have pilfered this Inturia thing from Letraine, then legged it here, apparently heading for the maze from the start. He'd even had a map, hadn't he? So he'd tried to get to this place whose inhabitants clearly knew how to forge it into weapons. I just couldn't see any other explanation. Still, he must have been out of luck and stupidly ended up in a trap. Or had someone "helped" him into it? There was just no way of knowing now.

I tipped the metal chips into my inventory and took one last look at the foundry. It was covered in inscriptions in the language I'd just learned. *"Beware... Danger... Death..."* My new friends sure knew how to enjoy themselves.

All this was well and good, but I still hadn't found the most important thing: the exit. There must be some other way out of here.

There was one very important thing that bound all the worlds together much stronger than all of the Players, or even dust and other useless junk. And that was logic. If there was an "on" button, it stood to reason that there was an "off" somewhere. If a place had an entrance, it was pretty obvious that somewhere there would be an exit.

And I discovered it in the very first room, almost in the corner. It had taken me a good hour of wandering around the dungeon until I finally stumbled upon it.

A broad stone staircase led upward, its steps knee-high and quite deep. Yeah right. I didn't need a reminder that this place had once been inhabited by giants so great that even the Original Beings feared them. What a shame they weren't around anymore. I sure could use help in fighting that cable-fingered monster.

It took me a long time to go up. An eternity, to be precise. Finally, the staircase ended in a blind wall. I was obliged to light up my hand again until I found an impressive-looking lever.

I listened closely. By now, the sky had stopped its ripping sound. I couldn’t hear anything else, either. I waited another five minutes just to be sure, but still nothing happened. Only then did I pull the lever toward myself.

The wall creaked, opening wide. The doorway was large enough to walk through without ducking. Which I did.

The doorway immediately closed behind me, leaving me in the maze — almost at its very exit, judging by the map. Another couple of bends, and I’d be outta here.

The problem was, as soon as I took a few steps, he reappeared. The monster, I mean. It was as if he’d been waiting for me all this time.

Dammit! I couldn’t even rewind time in order to hide back in the dungeon because it had been more than four seconds already.

I glanced at the remaining points. Only 26, just enough for two more time rewinds.

I managed to whip out the Gramr and even took a swipe at one of the “cables” that was reaching out for me. It fell to the ground — but the wound closed almost instantly while the monster had already grabbed me with its other fingers, dragging me toward its mouth.

[∞]

This time I was the first to step toward him, pointing my sword at his belly. Unfortunately, my artifact weapon which used to work so faultlessly against Players, failed to produce the desired effect on him, as if I’d poked him with a blunt toothpick.

His tentacles entwined my body; a veil of spit hovered over my head, dripping from his sharp teeth.

[∞]

I paused, unsure of what to do. This thing seemed to be immune to any kind of damage I could possibly deal it.

Having said that...

By now, one of my arms was the only body part still free from his grip. I reached for one of the Inturia shavings just as his teeth closed around my leg, splitting the skin.

My head exploded in agony. I was sure I was about to lose a leg. Still, I managed to bury the item’s sharp edge into the monster’s shoulder.

Surprisingly, it worked.

The effect that the artifact had had on him was probably similar to what silver bullets do to a shapeshifter’s body. Like that werewolf — shame I hadn’t gotten the chance to try it then. In any case, something was definitely happening. The Inturia seemed to decompose the monster’s body from within, leaving disgusting blobs of slime in its wake.

The monster let go of me, convulsing. Its mouth opened so wide that I managed to shrink back. My leg bled profusely onto the paving stones.

Everything was over very quickly, leaving me in silent amazement at the metal’s power. Less than ten seconds later, I was staring at a disgusting puddle of goo where a few of the monster’s limbs and cablelike fingers still twitched, disintegrating.

*You’ve killed **#%*@%%/.***

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 11.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 15.

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 14.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 6.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 16.

You've reached level 14.

Your Creation skill has increased to level 3.

Your Regeneration skill has increased to level 2.

Your Modification skill has increased to level 4.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 14.

Your Resistance skill has increased to level 5.

Your Acrobatics skill has increased to level 9.

Your Blocking skill has increased to level 6.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 24.

Your Stealth skill has increased to level 4.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 32.

Your Pole Weapon skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Pole Weapon.

Mastery level: 1

Every fifth blow in a series of attacks will result in a crit.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 7.

Your Medium Armor skill has increased to level 3.

Your Lying skill has increased to level 17.

Your Illusions skill has increased to level 11.

Your Bribery skill has increased to level 2.

Your Bargaining skill has increased to level 6.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 25.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 16.

Your fame has increased to 21.

Your fame has increased to 22.

Your fame has increased to 23.

Your fame has increased to 24.

Your fame has increased to 25.

Your reputation has changed to Defender.

All the flashing of messages before my eyes made me quite queasy. Hopping gingerly on my good leg, I approached the monster's remains and picked up the Inturia. Remarkably, the metal hadn't even got warm. I returned it to my inventory, then studied my leg.

It didn't look good. If I remembered rightly, my Regeneration only worked on stabbing and gunshot wounds. My Health had improved

somewhat, but only thanks to the new level I'd received, and it wasn't going to last long.

Luckily, I still had *Repletion* — which could heal all wounds regardless of their nature. Five hundred mana per activation was a bit pricey, of course — but at the moment, my health was more important.

That was actually an interesting spell. I didn't even have to make any magician-like gestures with my hands. I checked the wound and heaved a sigh of relief.

Still, my joy was short-lived. As soon as I took a step forward, I dropped to my knees. Although the wound had already closed, the bastard thing must have broken the bone. And unfortunately, Repletion seemed to only heal wounds — or at least I didn't remember anything in its description that said it could set broken bones.

And I still had to make it back to the Gate. How many monsters were still out there? Had they left already?

Thanks to my strong knees, I managed to reach the next bend on sheer willpower — but I wasn't doing a very good job of it. With my every move, my leg hurt worse.

I cast one look over the long corridor — and grinned against my will. At least now I knew how to get out of here.

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Chapter 16

THEY SAY THAT FEAR has a hundred eyes. What they forget to mention is that it also has very fast legs. Especially when you're a cat being chased by a pack of dogs.

Admittedly, there were no dogs here — but the few cable-fingered monsters still roaming the corridors must have done an excellent job in motivating Litius.

Luckily for me, he hadn't had the courage to leave the maze. I discovered my feline friend cowering in a side corridor quaking with fear. And after a quick but inspired pep talk, we were already working on a plan.

Going back to the Gatehouse seemed pretty pointless: according to Litius, that was exactly where the monsters had come from. His ears surely hadn't deceived him. Which left us with only two options: we could either make a dash down the canyon toward the city, or we could stay put where we were.

The latter option had its potential drawbacks too: judging by the approaching sounds, the creatures couldn't but have noticed the death of their fellow team member. Sooner or later, they were obliged to arrive here: whether to collect the evidence, question the eyewitnesses, perform an autopsy, or rip the murderer to bits.

That left us with only one option. I climbed on Litius' back (which brought back my childhood memories of riding around on my grandparents' huge guard dog in the garden) and he took off.

Litius trotted unhurriedly at first, mainly to make sure I got used to the ride, but also because he was sincerely sorry for me and my leg. He

could hear me gnashing my teeth with every stride he took. That pain was something else, I tell you.

Still, as soon as we got out of the maze into the canyon, Litius' sympathy vanished. Here, our worst fears were confirmed as three of the monsters were already creeping up toward the entrance. They all looked one and the same, like identical twins. Upon seeing us, they got extremely excited, apparently impatient to get to know us better.

That's when Litius really put his foot down.

That was amazing, actually, because he wasn't a cat in the full sense of the word. His fingers, for instance, although much thicker, were very humanlike. The fact that he had claws was irrelevant: the kind of speed he generated upon seeing the danger was just incredible.

Okay, so I did scream. My vision did swim with the agonizing pain, flashing purple circles before my eyes. My Dark alter ego did tense up within me like a spring ready to uncoil.

Litius ignored all of this entirely, focused on legging it from the monsters. I swear to God, had I dropped off his back, he wouldn't have even noticed. But that was something I couldn't afford, so I sank my fingers deep into the nape of his neck, holding on to him like a pitbull.

Finally, we cleared the canyon. I glimpsed some dilapidated houses flash past; then Litius whipped out onto a rocky plain. After a while, I saw a cobbled road leading uphill.

By then I wouldn't say that the monsters had fallen far behind, but we'd made up a bit of ground on them. Still, they had no intention of abandoning the chase.

The trouble came from the least expected quarter. I felt I was about to faint. My body just couldn't take the unbearable pain in my broken leg for

much longer, aggravated even further by the constant jogging. So it came to the only possible decision.

What do you do to an overheated computer? — You switch it off. So that was exactly what my body was trying to do, turning me off. It just didn't care that in fainting, I risked falling off Litius' back. Which was why I mustered all of my willpower, trying not to pass out for any longer than a couple of seconds.

Now the world around me had shrunk to the size of Litius' back. I couldn't even raise my head because it required too much effort. The only thing I was focused on was not to release my weakening grip on my friends' coat.

My consciousness was fading, to the point where I was beginning to ignore all the numerous sounds which were now surrounding me. Something was definitely going on. I caught glimpses of rapid, whirling movement; I even thought I caught sight of a huge pair of steel-shod combat boots, which brought back a stupid joke I'd once heard, that the size of one's manhood depends on his shoe size. If it were to be believed, then the guy in front of me must have been known in his past life by the name of Rasputin.

On this admittedly stupid thought, I blanked out. Or rather, I felt being thrown into a dark room where I had to wait for a long time until the door finally opened.

And I wasn't the only one who hurried for the exit. My Dark alter ego, who'd only recently got a taste of his own freedom, dashed for the door too.

This wasn't a jostling match where the results depend on one's speed, agility and quick thinking, but rather a mental duel. The moment you relaxed your focus, you were defeated.

Still, I was every bit as stubborn as he was. It was a bit like two dumb rams going head to head, bashing their horns, each trying to force the other one out of his way.

This time, too, I came out the winner.

Then the awakening came. With it, the pain returned too — not as fierce as before but pain nonetheless. My fingers ached from their desperate clenching onto Litius' coat.

But why did my side hurt? Had I done some damage to myself? Above all, my leg hurt like hell — which was no surprise, of course: the bone must have been completely shattered.

I gingerly touched the makeshift brace that someone had kindly fitted over my long-suffering limb. How interesting. Despite the pain, it felt like the bones had already set.

Only then did I take a good look around.

The room was spacious, with tall vaulted archways by way of windows. The mattress they'd put me on was sitting on the bare floor. Some heaped-up cushions and a tapestry on the wall. Not much to go on.

The massive wooden door was locked.

Where was I? What about Litius? What had happened to the cable-fingered monsters chasing after us? Lots of questions, not too many answers.

I removed the brace and scrambled to my feet, warily trying to step on my broken leg. The pain didn't get any worse. Good sign.

I limped over to the window — and froze, surveying the city that lay before me. I must have been on the third or fourth floor, judging by the view my room offered.

The streets below were crowded by identical poor huts with a handful of one- or two-storied stone houses thrown in the mix. A bit further on rose the slim towers of a slightly more impressive edifice which looked like a palace compared to the rest of it. A tall castle wall surrounded the settlement — I even thought I'd made out a barbican even though I couldn't see any soldiers around it.

Having said that, the city's civilian population didn't amount to much, either. They looked a bit funny, too, staggering around like certified zombies as if unable to move their feet.

My self-preservation instinct suggested I should stay here and wait for someone to come and fetch me. In any case, I couldn't do much walking with a broken leg.

Still, my unhealthy curiosity and misguided love for freedom were already pushing me toward the only available exit. In any case, this room had neither WiFi nor a TV — and even a haremful of houries didn't look like an option, either, so literally nothing was keeping me here.

The door opened so soundlessly as if it was secretly on my side. I stepped onto a small landing paved with beige stone, leading down onto a spiral staircase. I started taking the steps one at a time — I simply couldn't do it otherwise. Contrary to everything I knew about medicine, the pain continued to subside as I kept using my leg — "working it", as they call it.

How was it possible? I'd only broken it a few hours ago! Then again, it could have been several days... I had to find that out.

The staircase took me down to a large passage lined with several more doors, which must have connected my room to the main building. I tried one of the doors — but before I could open it wide, a tall Purg appeared in the doorway, so big he completely obstructed the view of the room behind him. The only things I'd managed to notice was a lab table

crowded with test tubes and the weird heavy smell filling the room. The guy's development brunch was apparently ***Tree Splitter***.

"So you've come round," he stated rather than asked. "Dhar Saadet will be happy to have a talk with you. He's in the Red Stateroom."

Not bothering to elaborate on it any further, he shut the door before my nose.

Not that he'd made it any clearer, other than I was now obliged to find a certain Dhar Saadet who seem to like talking to people. You never know, he might even be able to answer a few questions I had.

I tried another door, only to find it locked, so I just continued down the corridor.

Finally, it opened into a small badly lit room heaped up with cushions — apparently meant for people suffering from bad migraines. The room, in turn, opened into the aforementioned Red Stateroom.

It was all done up in weightless organza curtains, wooly rugs and silk upholstery. And all of it, down to the velvet-covered throne on a pedestal, was of such an intense red color it made my eyes hurt.

At least there were some sentient beings in here for a change. A few Purgs were apparently posted as guards at the room's windows and entrances. Add to this five girls clad in clothes as loose as their virtues. Finally, the Dhar Saadet himself: a morbidly obese orange-skinned human, his development branch apparently ***Blenderman***.

"You've come round, great!" he enthused, throwing his plump hands in the air. "How's your leg? I used my secret potion to make sure your bones set as quickly as possible."

"It's fine, thank you very much. Could you please tell me what happened to my friend?"

His eyes glinted unkindly. “What, that handsome catman who brought you here? He left. He went back to the Gatehouse before the Tremblers had come back.”

“The Tremblers?”

“Yes, the monsters. We only saw them from afar. Pale skin, long tentacles. Disgusting creatures.”

“They’re not tentacles,” I corrected him. “They’re fingers.”

Dhar Saadet literally jumped on his throne. “You can’t have seen them up close, surely!”

“We got a brief eyeball on them, yes. First we heard the sound, and then they came. But we managed to escape.”

“Of course you did,” Dhar Saadet nodded, as if agreeing with my story although not quite believing it. “What about your leg? How did you manage to injure it?”

“Just got caught in a magic trap.”

“Where exactly?”

“In a magic trap shop, of course.”

He laughed happily as if I’d just told him a very funny joke. Good. That gave me some time to seize the initiative and push my own agenda. Especially seeing as by now, I had many more questions to find answers to.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Sir Dhar Saadet, what is this place exactly?”

“This is Tyrolt. One of the few cities that survived the arrival of the Tremblers in our world.”

“So it was them who destroyed all the other settlements here in Atrain?”

“Of course not. The Tremblers may be ravenous and unstoppable, but they can’t devour all of our world at once. The force that brought our cities down was panic. There were some very entrepreneurial creatures around who hurried to announce the arrival of the Apocalypse, and that’s how it all started.”

“What started, excuse me?”

“We used to have a joke about this guy who wrote a few letters which all said the same thing: *“They’ve found out about our plan. Escape while you still can.”* He sent these letters to all of the Viziers, and one to the Emir himself. The next morning, the city was deserted. Well, that’s basically what happened to us too. As soon as our rulers had found out that their treasures were at stake, they hurried to flee our world. And a nation without power is like a sword without a whetstone. The Atrainians didn’t need the Tremblers to reduce our world to ruins; they did a very good job of it themselves. Left without law and order, our cities became easy prey for the monsters.”

Without adding another word, Dhar Saadet languidly motioned one of the girls to approach. She offered him a cup, and he took a few swigs.

“So how did *you* survive?” I asked.

Dhar Saadet climbed to his feet and waved to me to follow him. The guards posted by one of the exits stepped aside, allowing us to pass onto a large balcony.

Here, the view was strikingly different. Apparently, my room opened to the building’s other side.

Below lay a small garden surrounded by more guards. The area further on was crowded with similar dilapidated huts — and beyond them, not really very far from here, towered the city gates.

But that wasn't what caught my interest. There was something much more curious there. Namely, two Gatekeepers, so tall and powerful that even I could see them from where I was.

"Wait a sec," I said. "I heard that the Tyrolt Gate had been shut down?"

"Not exactly. It was destroyed. To be precise, it was vandalized by the Tremblers during their very first attack on the city. The Gatekeeper was killed; the casualties among the townsfolk were mind-boggling. We did our best to put up a defense but our weapons don't seem to affect them that much. Their wounds close even as you watch. The only thing that can kill them is a Gatekeeper's sword. I'd love to know what metal they're forged of."

Hm. I probably knew the answer to that.

Well, at least I'd managed to find out what was going on here. So it was Gatekeepers vs. Tremblers. I used to think that the Gatekeepers were just glorified doormen. Apparently, I was wrong. They turned out to be our last line of defense against those slimy invaders. I'd love to know a bit more about them too, only who could I ask?

Dhar Saadet must have misinterpreted my silence. "Don't worry. You're safe here. The Tremblers don't dare get anywhere near the city. Not with Gatekeepers guarding our peace."

I noticed a few gaunt zombie-like figures stumbling past the mansion guards. They looked lost, their gazes glazed over, as if they weren't even trying to focus on any particular object.

Or could they?

Suddenly one of them rushed forward. He was just as filthy as the rest of them, his clothes a similar collection of rags. His gaze was slightly more deranged, that's all. He barged at the guards so fiercely that I took a step back, afraid that he could get to us too. One of the mansion's guards shot aside like a tennis ball, the other received an impressive thump in his stomach.

Luckily, the scuffle didn't last. Another guard hurried to the scene. He gave the attacker such a hearty whack with the handguard of his sword that the poor man slumped onto the pavement.

"Wretched dust junkies," Dhar Saadet spat on the floor in disgust. "There's just no stopping them when they run out of snuff."

"Run out of snuff?" I repeated without taking my eyes off the Player. The guards had already dragged his unconscious body to one of the huts and left it there.

"Dust is much stronger than any known drug," Dhar Saadet began to explain. "That's why it's so popular with many. It causes an initial wave of euphoria which is unfortunately very short-lived. What it also does though it soothes pain — all pain, emotional as well as physical. But that's if you take a regular dose."

As I listened, I was getting a very bad feeling about this.

"Then you begin to feel sort of disconnected. Those lumps of flesh below — sorry, I don't have any other name for them because they ceased being Seekers a long time ago — that's the state they're currently in. And later, when withdrawal sets in, they experience furious anger as their bodies demand a new fix. You've seen it yourself, no good me telling you. Basically, if you keep an eye of them, they're not a problem. The only drawback they experience is that they lose the ability to use their

development branch — but they don’t need it anymore, not in the state they’re in.”

I didn’t like it at all. In fact, I so didn’t like it that I even tried to rewind time.

[∞]

Nothing.

Dhar Saadet was still standing there in silence leaning on the balcony railing. Had my time trick worked, he should have been talking now, telling me all about those dust junkies. Apparently, time hadn’t rolled back.

“What did you inject me with?”

“Same stuff as all the others, only a smaller dose. Because you’re not used to the drug yet. It was for your own good. Your leg was in a terrible state. Besides, I didn’t want to lose such a precious guest. I was afraid you might try to escape as soon as you came round. Just like your catman did once he’d sussed out my intentions...”

“Your intentions?” I asked, reaching into my inventory.

My hand closed around the first thing it touched: my plasma gun. Good job that none of his dude’s henchmen were professional thieves. Time to wipe that smug grin off his oily face.

“But of course. How could I not have recognized you? Such a famous Player with so many Avatars and the ability to rewind time? Your fame precedes you.”

Shit. Now I could understand all those celebrities wearing sunglasses and baseball caps. Still, it was too late to beat myself up. True, I’d temporarily lost my most important tool — but I still had my weapons on me.

“No points for guessing who you are, I suppose,” I said. “You’re just a drug dealer. But what would you want me for?”

He smiled. “Stupid question, isn’t it? There must be loads of Players around who would be interested in your particular Avatars. And your development branch. Life isn’t easy here in Tyrolt. All the normal Players left as soon as the Tremblers arrived. All that’s left here is mob, human junk. Most of them already are my clients — but their spending capacity keeps dwindling. Tyrolt is rapidly heading into decline. Naturally, I need to start thinking about my own future — and you could become my golden ticket.”

I whipped out the plasma gun and almost trained it on him — when a Godawful whack landed on my arm, rendering it listless. I didn’t feel much pain though, so that wretched drug of theirs did seem to work.

In the meantime, I found myself locked in the gentle hug of several strong guards who’d instantly turned up at the scene. So gentle it was in fact that I couldn’t even move.

“Good weapon,” Dhar Saadet said, picking up the gun. “Made in one of the Central Worlds. Well, my messenger should already be on his way to the Gatehouse to spread the word. All we need to do now is wait for the highest bidder. In the meantime, you can grab some rest in one of the rooms. One of the *lower* rooms,” he added, addressing his goons.

So they dragged me back — through the red Stateroom, the dark room, the passageway lined with all the doors, toward the spiral staircase. Only this time they took me downstairs and locked me up in a tiny room, maybe ten feet by ten.

I looked around. A folded bed on the floor, an upended tin mug next to it — and not a single window.

So how was one supposed to get out of here?

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Chapter 17

AS THE SAYING GOES, there're at least two ways out even of a whale's belly. The biggest problem is to find them. Those with harder heads might find one soon enough while the more ingenious Players are bound to discover more imaginative ways instead of just bashing their heads against closed doors.

The only thing I can say in my defense is that I was apparently under the influence of that wretched substance he'd injected me with. By now, it was beginning to wear off though, judging by the increasing pain in my body. Bastard.

"I could help," Darkie's voice said in my head.

"Yeah right. There'll be nothing left of this city by the time you're done with them. Scorched earth policy, that's what it's called. Been there, done that."

The voice shut up.

I curled up on the filthy bed. The thin mattress smelled of mice and stale sweat. But what was worse, a heavy wave of nonchalance flooded over me. This must have been the "disconnection" that Dhar Saadet had mentioned earlier. I couldn't think straight; focusing on something became a big struggle. To give you some idea, it felt like the effects of trying to cure a hangover with a strong beer and a sleeping pill.

Besides, I was getting shivery. I curled up under my trench coat, trying to do something productive. The least thing I could do was distribute my stat points. For some strange reason, my victory over the cable-fingered bastard had upped me one level.

Available points: 3

Strength: 29 (x2)

Intellect: 26 (x3)

Fortitude: 26 (x)

Agility: 35 (x)

Stamina: 22 (x2)

Rhetoric: 31 (x)

Speed: 19 (x)

This was really a no-brainer. All is fish that cometh to the net. In my case, the Game had been more than generous with its bonuses to Strength, Intellect and Stamina, raising my Health, Mana and Vigor.

I say a no-brainer — but even this simple calculation had taken me several minutes to compute. My thoughts barely moved in my head, like massive boulders pushed by pounding waves, gradually getting heavier and ever slower.

Logically, in the end I just passed out. It wasn't sleep, just some sort of stand-by mode, with drool dribbling down my chin.

No idea how long I'd stayed like this. A long time. A very long time. I was awoken by a growing pain, so strong I just couldn't take it anymore.

The other thing that awoke me was anger. I ground my teeth, groaning, but it didn't make it any better. Despite the fact that my leg seemed to have indeed knitted, the pain was about to rip it apart.

“I could help,” Darkie’s voice repeated.

“How can you possibly help me?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“I know how to get out of here. You know it too, it’s just that the pain is preventing you from thinking straight. I could take that pain away and get us both out of this wretched dungeon.”

I can’t say I hesitated for that long. The pain was so bad it simply forced me to make the right decision. “Do it.”

Immediately I felt better. It was just like I’d been kept underwater, then finally allowed to resurface.

No pain, no anger. Whatever anger I’d had, had been taken on board by my Dark self. Ditto for my body. Plus, now I could hear what he’d mentioned earlier: the shuffling of several pairs of boots which grew closer — until finally, they stopped behind the door, talking in a language I didn’t know.

“That’s Purgish,” Darkie explained.

That I’d already sussed out myself. All the creatures I’d seen in the Red Stateroom earlier had orange skin. Apparently, Dhar Saadet only trusted his own compatriots.

“Don’t state the obvious,” I said. “No need to pretend we’re friends.”

“Very well. I won’t,” my Dark self said, suppressing a smirk. Or maybe he’d just faked sarcasm to make a statement.

For a moment, the room became lighter as my visitors opened a small hatch in the door.

“We’ve brought you some food,” I heard a voice speaking in my own language. “Our Purg will be here soon. Don’t even try to do anything

stupid.”

Strangely enough, my body showed no intention of doing the things I thought it would. I’d thought we’d be pillaging and plundering by now, sowing death in our wake. True, I didn’t have my time rewind anymore. And my leg must be hurting like hell now. Plus they’d even taken my plasma gun away. But we still had the Gramr. And one hell of a lot of willpower. Probably.

Still, Darkie had other ideas. He slumped back onto the bed and curled up just like I’d done earlier. Was he really planning on going to sleep at a moment like this?

The door’s bolt clanked. My eyes were assaulted by an even brighter light. A short Purg came in, holding a lantern in one hand and a deep bowl in the other. Such a shame I couldn’t smell the food in it.

Immediately, the door was shut again. A tiny peep hole opened. By “tiny” I mean no more than four inches high. Had they thought of making it bigger, they’d have had no need to open the door at all.

The Purg guard set the bowl on the floor, then shone his lantern over my curled-up body as if performing a quick medical check on me.

Darkie must have decided to play along, simulating something akin to an epileptic fit. My body began to shake and convulse. A barely audible groan escaped my mouth. The sight would have alarmed anyone.

I thought I could second-guess the guard’s intentions. How would you have acted if something bad had just happened to your boss’ precious prisoner? Wouldn’t both your job and your balls be at stake? Personally, I would have run for help.

But apparently, the guard had a lot of experience in handling junkies. He purposefully walked over to me, went down on one knee and—

And then Darkie sprang into action, focused, swift and confident.

He grabbed the guard by the shoulder and yanked him down, throwing him on his side. He didn't want to kill or even injure him: all he did was force the guard to the ground and pin him down. Actually, had I not been in "his" head, I might have thought this was some sort of amateur 18+ video.

But no. I glimpsed the glint of a vial which Darkie had whipped out of my inventory, then poured its contents down the guard's half-open mouth.

"Hey!" a voice called out from behind the door.

The door bolt clanked again. I heard the stomping of boots. A sweep of a powerful hand sent me flying into a corner.

Darkie didn't appear upset. He was laughing — a hoarse laugh reminiscent of an old raven making fun of baby chicks. I thought he'd said something to the downed guard — and whatever it was, the guard didn't like it because he looked really scared.

The others helped the guard to his feet and started asking him questions. Although I didn't speak any Purgish, their intonations made it clear they wanted to know if he was okay. The guy nodded, and that was the end of it.

"If you do something like this ever again, we'll be obliged to chain you up," the tallest and fattest of the guards said — apparently their boss.

Darkie just continued to grin as if he had nothing to do with what was going on. Finally, the door slammed shut; the bar was slid back in; the footsteps began to fade away.

Darkie scrambled back to his feet, leaning on the wall by the door.

“What have you done?” I asked.

Darkie grinned, but I could see he wasn’t in a good way. “Since when do I need to explain the obvious to you?”

His — my — face was distorted with a grimace of agony. He bent down and began rubbing my — his — broken leg as if that could help soothe the pain. Still, he deigned to reply. “I asked our new friend — who will remain our friend for at least another thirty minutes — to do me a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“To help us get out of here.”

“He’s not in a hurry to do so, is he?”

“Oh yes. He’ll do exactly as he was told,” Darkie dangled the empty vial in the air, then flung it at the bed. The vial hit the wall with a sad glassy sound.

Of course. Hadn’t I picked up that vial from one of our attackers back in the canyon?

As if reading my thoughts (then again, why “as if”?) Darkie added, “You’d better ask yourself how come those three idiots had a potion like that on them. I have a funny feeling — and so do you — that this isn’t the sort of thing you buy in a corner shop. But that’s not what you should be asking. How come the attackers knew you’d be in Atrain today, of all days?”

“Eh,” I faltered, not knowing what to say to such an obvious and logical question.

“How many creatures knew you were coming here?” the Dark one paused, pretending he was trying to remember. “What, only three?”

“You surely don’t mean...”

“Oh yes I do. And I suggest you give it some thought for a change. This whole thing stinks, if you ask me. You fainted next to your catman friend, only to come round in a gilded cage.”

You’ve killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -1580. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

“I suggest we discuss it in more appropriate circumstances,” Darkie said. “I’m about to save our collective ass.”

You’ve killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -1680. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Can you use your brains for a change?!” the Dark one exploded. The pain in my — his — leg must have been dreadful, forcing him to lose it. “You know the answer. You just don’t want to think.”

“I know,” I said. “When you give someone a task, it turns them into your tool. Your weapon. You get the karma for whatever they’ve done while under your influence. Did you tell that Purg to kill all the other guards?”

You’ve killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -1780. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

“I told him to wait for a chance to kill all the other guards, then come back here and release me — and you too, seeing as it can’t be avoided.”

Once again I heard the sound of the bolt being pushed. The door opened.

The guard who’d so stupidly drunk the Submission potion from Darkie’s hands entered the room without fear, shining his lantern into every corner of my temporary although admittedly crammed abode.

“I’ve killed them all, just as you asked me.”

“Excellent. Now come here,” Darkie said, leaning on the guard’s shoulder. “Now take me... us... out of here.”

Apparently, my leg wasn’t faring well because we couldn’t move fast at all. Judging by Darkie’s desperate limping, I wouldn’t have been able to get out of here on my own at all. And I wouldn’t have thought of using that potion, that’s for sure. Which meant that it was my Dark side doing all of the out-the-box thinking. Not very good news, I tell you.

We climbed the spiral staircase until we came to one of the landings. Judging by the dimly lit corridor, it was apparently situated below the one I’d been to earlier. It had no doors, either. We followed it to some sort of back yard which must have served as an open-air storage space piled up with wooden crates and paper parcels. I got a funny feeling that drugs weren’t the only merchandise Dhar Saadet dabbled in.

Darkie stopped, allowing himself a quick breather. “Where to now?”

“That door over there,” the guard replied. “It’ll take you to the garden.”

“Come on, then, quit stallin’.”

We staggered on: Darkie who was leaning heavier on the guard's shoulder with every passing moment, and the guard himself, who probably had no idea what was going on but showed no displeasure.

The door indeed took us out into a garden, replete with various shrubbery, lush grass, a tall fence and a nasty-looking scaly thing chained to a stake. The monster turned out to be quite fat and placid, lying belly up snorting in his sleep.

The guard pointed at a nearby hedge corridor, about 3 foot high, which indeed led toward a trellised cast-iron gate.

But just as we were about to make one final dash for it, fate interfered. I heard two voices speaking Purgish. We'd barely managed to duck behind one of the bushes when the voices' owners arrived at the scene — namely, two guards. And just by chance, they were heading in our direction.

"Kill them," Darkie hissed through clenched teeth, addressing "our" guard. "Just make sure you stay alive. Then come back and help me out of here."

The latter instruction made perfect sense. Because if "our" guard failed to come back, we'd be truly stuck here. The drug's effects were already wearing off, including its painkilling properties.

So our guard obediently headed toward the others. As they knew him, his arrival didn't set any alarm bells ringing. If anything, they were happy to see him although admittedly surprised. Although I couldn't understand a word of their exchange, I could tell by their intonations that the others were poking fun at him, asking what he was doing here of all places. Our guard laughed it off.

This potion seemed to have a very unusual effect on him. For some reason, I used to think that a submission spell would make one obey all orders like a dumb piece of wood. But apparently, it didn't affect the

guard’s personality, allowing him to use all of his abilities in order to carry out his orders.

Finally, they finished talking and parted ways, still perfectly alive. Our guard showed no intention of attacking them. On the contrary: he even slapped one on the shoulder as he went his own way.

Could the action of the potion be wearing off already? It shouldn’t. Didn’t the description mention 30 minutes? What was it, then?

My panic lasted all of three seconds. Before the other two guards managed to take a couple of steps, the one on the right collapsed under a powerful sword blow to his neck. Had he had at least one Blanket on him, he could have escaped unscathed — but how were they supposed to know there could be danger awaiting them on their regular patrol route? That was their mistake.

You’ve killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -1880. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

The other guard had more chance to react and even managed to lift his sword in front of himself. I heard the clanking of steel and the singing of blades as sparks fell to the ground.

And what was much worse, in this honest fight where none of his cunning or surprise effect gave him any advantage, “our” guard immediately began to lose. Soon the other dude was getting the upper hand, making the outcome of their duel pretty clear to us.

Darkie scrambled out from behind the bushes. “Hi there, stupid!”

The other guard turned to the sound — which was enough for our guy to deal him a lethal blow.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -1980. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

Still, our guy hadn't come out of it unscathed, either. His shirt sleeve was ripped, blood trickling down his elbow. He walked over to me — or to Darkie, rather — and helped him to his — my — feet.

I was beginning to feel some sort of sympathy for the poor duped soul. Darkie, however, was much more brusque.

"Show me the way, quick. If someone heard all the commotion, this place will be swarming with guards in a minute. How many guards by the gate?"

"Two."

"We'll have to kill them quickly. I'll help you."

Still, his plans weren't meant to be. Before we could advance fifty yards, the garden filled with the stomping of boots, the clinking of chainmail and the shouts of soldiers. First they cut us off from the gate, and then five more guards cut us off from the rear.

That was it. The show was over.

The Purg guards bared their swords. Still, they didn't appear in a hurry to attack us. They must have realized very well that time was on their side now. The scene was now almost complete, only lacking the main actor.

Who wasn't long in coming, either.

Only now, as I watched Dhar Saadet slump heavily toward us, did I grasp the whole extent of both his obesity and his misery. Locked up within his own palace, surrounded by the same meager choice of pleasures which

by now must have bored this “Blenderman” witless, he was a slave of his position, pure and simple. Outside his palace gate, everybody hated him, and he knew it. He really viewed me as his chance to get out of here, escaping this place and starting a new better life.

Dammit! I couldn’t even hate him properly now. Luckily, I had my Dark side to do just that. He had plenty of hatred to go around.

Now, too, he eased himself away from “our” guard and stood firmly on both feet. I could only guess the extent of agony it must have cost him — but Darkie managed to keep his cool.

“Such a shame you decided to leave us so early!” Dhar Saadet said with a fake smile, wiping sweat from his brow.

“I’m afraid the lodgings weren’t to my liking. I’ll see if I can find a better hotel around.”

“I’m not sure I can agree with that. I thought you were a sensible man. And now I’ll be obliged to chain you up, I’m afraid. Did you see that pet lizard of mine? The one in the garden over there? You might have to keep him company from now on.”

“I’m not sure I can agree with that, either.”

“I don’t think you have a choice. It’s true that you somehow managed to trick Farikh into defecting to your side, but that’s all over now.”

“If you say so,” Darkie said with a nasty little smile — the kind of smile lurking on a poker player’s face when he lands a straight flush in his hand. “Farikh, my friend, do me a favor. Please kill yourself.”

What happened next was too unexpected. The guards must have been expecting one of us to attack them but not to take their own life. That’s probably why none of them must have thought of interfering when “our’ guard calmly pointed his sword toward himself, pressed its pommel against

a rock and threw himself onto the blade. Even Dhar Saadet's many chins quivered in amazement — but he quickly came round, regaining his calm.

Farikh convulsed in a pool of blood. The tip of the sword was sticking out of his back: a sharp, well-honed blade he was supposed to use against his master's enemies, not on himself. Blood stained the beautiful garden as he thrashed in agony.

I turned away, unable to watch him suffer. Which was why I didn't see the expression on Dhar Saadet's face as he said in a calm, laidback voice,

"So you've killed one of my men. You really think you can profit from this petty revenge?"

"Oh yes, I can. In more ways than you can think of."

Unlike me, my Dark alter ago hadn't for one moment taken his eyes off the agonizing Farikh's face. Only when the hapless guard stopped moving and began crumbling to ashes, did Darkie heave a sigh of relief.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2080. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

"Yes, in many more ways than you can think of," Darkie repeated, opening my interface.

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Chapter 18

THERE'S A PARABLE much loved by pop psychology bloggers dishing out garden-variety advice to their gullible audiences. You know the one I mean, the Two Wolves Story. The white wolf is supposed to symbolize good, and the black one evil. The two wolves are always at battle with each other — and apparently, the one who wins is the one you feed.

Using this particular simile, my black wolf had just grown to the size of a wild boar capable of squashing everyone with its sheer weight. Can't say I was happy to see it, but right now my plummeting Karma had come in extremely handy.

You've unlocked auxiliary abilities of the Divine Avatar: ***Destroyer****. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires 5000 pt. Dark Karma.*

Deflection. *Allows you to parry every third attack in a series and redirect its damage to your opponent as a blinding flash. Can't be blocked with protection spells.*

Duration: 3 min

Cooldown: 5 days

Frenzy *– in a melee, increases both damage and your chances of dealing a crit 3% per every opponent.*

Duration: 1 min

Cooldown: 3 days

Metamorphosis *— allows you to transform into the very first owner of the Destroyer Avatar at the peak of their power.*

Duration: 2 min

Cooldown: 10 days

You've unlocked additional abilities of the Divine Avatar: Conqueror. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires 5,000 pt. Dark Karma.

Disarmament *– forces your opponents to lay down their weapons for an indefinite duration of time.*

Range: 60 ft

Duration: 10 sec

Cooldown: 7 days

Suppression *– slows your opponents' speed down 30%*

Duration: 20 sec

Cooldown: 4 days

Summons to arms *— activates an effect increasing the damage dealt by all friendly creatures 50%.*

Range: 50 ft

Duration: 1 min

Cooldown: 3 days

It just showed you the full extent of the difference between my Dark alter ego and myself. What would I have done in his place? I might have

activated Suppression and Summons to Arms, then just made a dash for my life. Literally made a dash, because the activation of the Avatar's additional abilities had resulted in a huge surge of energy, once again suppressing the pain in my leg.

Darkie now stood firmly on both his legs too, sizing up Dhar Saadet's little army gathered all around him. The look in his eyes made it abundantly clear he had no intention of fleeing the scene. I'd had this hunch for quite a while already.

Darkie had no intention of playing it cheap, either. He simply activated all of the Destroyer's abilities he'd just received.

Immediately he began to transform — literally. The front of my trench coat groaned, stretching over his expanding chest. The back of the coat had already ripped at the seams, releasing a powerful pair of membranous wings. I was lucky I'd never bothered to button up the demons' gift because I had just grown two extra pairs of arms. Don't look at me like that! I'm not mad: I had three pairs of arms now — a natural pair of my own original ones, plus two pairs of bionic manipulators.

So what did we have as the end result? A huge six-armed Kabirid mechanoid in a pair of wooly pants which looked more like tights on him, and a torn trench coat stretched tight over his body. What a bastard! You'd think he could take better care of my stuff.

But that wasn't the main thing. I choked in indignation as I watched his stats courtesy of the very first owner of the Destroyer Avatar.

Health: 2860

Mana: 2420

Vigor: 1200

Excuse me?? What kind of level was this? How could one even farm so many hitpoints?

I remembered Hunter's conversation with the Grand Master. Of course! The name of the first owner of the Destroyer Avatar was Shiva, wasn't it? The Player whom the commoners worshipped as a god. And judging by his hitpoints, he was indeed a god. Okay, so the Indians didn't quite get his appearance right, but that was irrelevant. It's been a while, after all.

But the interesting thing was, with these kinds of stats how had he allowed himself to be killed in the first place? It can't have been easy to smoke an omnipotent dude like this.

My stomach fell at the thought of such lethal creatures still out on the prowl.

While I was thus pondering, Darkie in his new Kabirid guise was busy with more pressing matters. Namely, with killing everything that moved. The Gramr in one hand, the Katzbalger in another, the Dagger of the Thief of Atair in a third one (of course! Now that he'd turned into a Kabirid, he could use it, couldn't he?) and the Raging Throat of a Dragon in a fourth, while casting a spell with the two remaining ones.

What happened next quickly escalated to a local Apocalypse-grade disaster. Dhar Saadet must have realized he was losing control of the situation, so he issued the most bizarre order he could possible give in this situation. He told his guards to disarm the six-armed Kabirid and bind him hand and foot.

Not quite realizing how they were supposed to do it, the guards attacked Darkie all together. It took them several long seconds to finally produce a length of rope which one of them must have pulled out of his own inventory.

By then, “Shiva” was already getting a taste for it. My Gramr drew a long arc through the air, cleaving the nearest guard shoulder to hip.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Anthropomorph****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You’ve gained the Wave of Fire spell.

And I can’t even say that Darkie was running amok or something. On the contrary: all the spells he was casting were exclusively of the defense kind. *Mantle*, *Blanket*, *Mantle*, *Blanket*... He had plenty of time to cast them, too, because the guards weren’t in a hurry to defy the jet of flames produced by the Throat of a Dragon. Still, they too were beginning to get their wits together, positioning themselves strategically along the garden’s perimeter.

The earth quaked underfoot like an awakening monster. The paved path leading to the gate came alive as the bigger of its cobblestones rose into the air, then shot up toward Darkie. At least twenty of them must have hit Shiva’s powerful torso. Half of them dropped impotently to the ground, striking cascades of sparks from his force shield, but the other half seemed to have dealt “me” some serious damage, judging by my quivering Health bar.

Now I could fully appreciate Deflection in all its glory. Before Darkie could even see who’d cast the spell on him, the brazen caster’s outline was highlighted. The man shrieked and dropped to the side, killed by his own spell. Just as Deflection said, his every third attack had been redirected back to him with a vengeance. As the saying goes, there’s a time to scatter stones, and now was apparently his time to gather them.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Geokinesis****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Chameleon Skill

You've gained the Torrent spell.

Now all hell broke loose for real. The guards must have realized that they should stop pussyfooting around before they got themselves killed. They started showering "Shiva" with some quite ill-meaning sword and spear blows while launching heavy-duty spells at him, completely ignoring Dhar Saadet's cussing and screaming his protest. Unlike him, they viewed "me" as a threat and not a bargaining chip, and couldn't care less about the prisoner's safety when their own survival was at stake.

One of the bolder guards received a blow from my Katzbalger — not a deadly one, especially considering the guard's Blanket protection. Still, its sheer intensity sent the poor guy flying through the air like a rubber ball. The outlines of a few other Players lit up, highlighted, as they received the deflected damage and paused briefly, looking around, trying to work out who it was who'd dealt them the blow. Yet others continued to fight with a dogged determination, confronting "Shiva" against all odds.

One of the guards recklessly walked right into the fiery jet of the Throat of a Dragon.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Mesmerist****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Confusion spell.

All that was left of him was his blackened sword and a handful of ashes lying in the wilted grass which had been lush and green only a moment ago. The fight was getting hotter, literally.

Actually, Darkie did more wounding than killing. Not due to his humane intentions, of course, but simply because the guards were getting careful, keeping a respectable distance and dragging their less lucky comrades out of harm's way.

But now "Shiva" got moving. Like a powerful off-roader, he began fighting his way toward the garden gate, ignoring everything and everyone in his path. The gate meant freedom — no matter how illusory it might be. Provided we managed to get out of here, of course.

Oh. I was already referring to him as "us". Had I really begun to think of us as one and the same person?

His Kabirid hooves sank deep into the heavily furrowed earth under his many-ton weight. His six arms moved ceaselessly, not allowing anyone to get anywhere near him. This was the God of War incarnate, sowing death in his wake.

Still, you couldn't really say he was invincible. His Health had already dropped from 2860 to 1293 just during this brief exchange. Even though most of the guards were already out of circulation, it was mainly due to Deflection which stunned his attackers with the damage they dealt. Some of the guards switched to the defensive, launching darts from a safe distance. Darkie had already paused once in order to clip their shafts, the darts' steely stingers sinking deep into his body. I suppose I could say goodbye to my trench coat. Bumpkin wouldn't be amused.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 25.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Sonar****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Combustion spell.

Oh. That was another hapless Player who'd lingered a moment too long within "Shiva's" powerful reach. A pretty predictable outcome, if you ask me.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Phasis****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

And this was another guard who'd stuck his neck out in panic. Defying common sense, he made a dash toward "me" instead of following his brethren. Darkie met him with his powerful torso, knocking him down, then stepped on his head. The crunching of bones; the wet sound of a hoof stuck in the guy's brains; then he too crumbled to dust.

"Arzam, stop him!" Dhar Saadat's voice rang with a note of hysteria. He grabbed the shoulder of a squat mustachioed Purg guard, pointing the other quivering fat hand at us.

I hadn't seen this guy here earlier. Was this the reinforcements arriving?

The newcomer Purg shot his hand in the air Freddie Mercury-style. All he needed was a broken mic stand and a fancy stage costume.

Still, I soon realized this was no laughing matter. "Shiva" stopped in his tracks — but not because he wanted a quick respite or something. His legs were entangled by fat tree roots which had sprouted from underground.

The hedge, too, was rapidly growing new vines which reached out for him as if in a fast forward.

I really didn’t like it. Ditto for “Shiva”.

Still, this was the main difference between the two of us. While I wasted precious time pondering and ruminating, frozen either in fear or amazement, Darkie got the job done. Can’t say I blame him.

My Katzbalger disappeared from his hand, replaced by a dart very similar to those the guards had been launching at him. In the few seconds it took him to take aim while the vines continued to entwine his torso, I remembered where I’d seen it before. This was the Immobilizing Dart I’d taken off the Korl who’d attacked me by my house. He’d had two of these, hadn’t he: one which had ended up in Traug’s body, while the other one had ricocheted off Darkie’s armor without activating. I was pretty sure that Darkie had known about it all along, keeping it until the moment was just right.

In fact, I had the impression that my personality had been split between the two of us. I, the humble Serge Demidov, got to keep all the mundane qualities of a regular commoner, while Darkie had become a universal Player: smart, cunning and treacherous.

The guards froze in a wary silence — but the dart flew over their heads, hitting the aforementioned Arzam with the kind of precision I could never aspire to. It hit him dead on the head with a nauseating wet sound, splattering gray matter and splinters of the guy’s skull all over Dhar Saadet who happened nearby. I wished I could enjoy the sight of him for longer, but the guy’s remains were already crumbling to dust.

A change in development branch available: ***Chlorokinesist****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You’ve gained the Dash skill.

You've gained the Attraction spell.

I could have sworn that this unfortunate incident had made a considerable dent in the guards' morale. No amount of money is worth dying for. By now, there were only five of them left standing, not counting those wounded by Deflection or unlucky enough to have gotten a taste of Darkie's punches.

At which point, for the first time in a very long stretch, the two of us seemed to have come to the same conclusion.

Trying to finish off the guards was pretty pointless. If anything, it could play a very bad joke on us, considering the measly two-minute duration of the Metamorphosis thing. We just couldn't expect to kill everyone off and walk away in the tiny amount of time we had left. Much as I'd have loved to shake the dust of Dhar Saadet off my feet, today just wasn't the day.

"Shiva" bent the cast-iron gate bars in his hands like aluminum spoons. In less than a few seconds, we were to escape into the junkies' bidonville. A few of the latter — miserable excuses for the noble Seekers they'd once been — were loitering about nearby, watching our escapades with a certain degree of mild interest.

"Take him! Don't let him escape!"

The whole garden was ringing with Dhar Saadet's screaming. Still, the guards didn't seem to be in a hurry to go after me. A few halting steps were all they could muster. Unhindered, "Shiva" forced himself through the mangled gate and ran down one of the many narrow lanes, pushing junkies out of his way like they were rag dolls. He even tried to take a few tentative wingbeats, but his lack of flying experience sent him somersaulting forward, very nearly knocking him off his feet.

Never mind. He'd have to leg it, literally — or should I say hoof it? The most important thing was, he'd made it. He'd managed to escape!

Finally, Darkie took one last stumbling step and very nearly collapsed onto the cobblestones, growling like a cornered wild beast as hunters teased it with pitchforks. He looked at his human hands, the tattered trench coat, the listless leg.

"That's it... I... can't... go any further..."

This made me realize one very simple thing. At the moment, we couldn't afford to behave as blanket-hogging rivals. Instead of some hypothetical danger, both of us were facing the prospect of a very real physical death literally looming on the horizon. This made us closer than any allies can ever be.

"Roger that, Houston," I said. "I'll take over the controls from here."

Still, as soon as my senses had returned, I was in no mood for joking any longer. It felt like I'd been caught in a harvester, then rearranged back. All the credit went to my Darker self who, as I'd already noticed, didn't seem to give a damn about the integrity of his — my — physical body. If it went on like that, I might have to celebrate my 30th birthday in a crematorium.

"Okay, I'm sorry about that," Darkie's voice said within me. *"I'll try to be more careful next time. Would you like me to take you to a salon pedicure?"*

"Provided you pick up the tab. Now get lost."

I scrambled to my feet and looked back to check on the mansion. My reverse transformation into a tattered half-blood Korl seemed to have offered some encouragement to the guards who were now jostling each other out of the way by the mangled gate, trying to get out.

I took a quick look around. Just to please, this particular street was very long and very straight. What did they think it was, Fifth Avenue or something? Still, I noticed a tiny side street not very far from where I was standing. That was the only escape route available — and my only chance.

Trying not to scream with pain, I took a tentative step. And another one. And one more. My head was spinning; dark circles span before my eyes — but at the moment, survival took priority.

Finally, I dove into the street, only to cuss in desperation. It was a veritable maze of narrow alleys; the only thing I could say in its defense was that no cable-fingered monster could squeeze its way in here. By the same token, I could hear the approaching stomping of feet as Dhar Saadet's goons were getting closer, apparently impatient to give me a guided tour of the place.

Guided by the map, I took a tentative turn, followed by two more, gradually limping toward what I believed to be the city limits. Unfortunately, this wasn't the route they'd taken while bringing me here, so I was obliged to unravel the fog of war as I went.

Which eventually played a bad joke on me as yet another turn took me to a dead end: a few shacks listing to a tall wall, darkened by time and slimy with all the filth poured under it over the years. Even with a good leg, I doubted I'd be able to climb it — and now it was out of the question. In the meantime, the guards' footsteps were getting closer.

One of the doors was ajar. I poked it with my shoulder and staggered into the shack. It was empty and tiny, with a decrepit roof, a rusty cooker and a folded bed in a corner. Luckily for me, its owners were out. Even though it wasn't big enough to swing a cat, I just might keep the guards out if I took up a position by the door.

I checked my inventory. My plasma gun was gone; the Throat of a Dragon had no charges left in it. The Gramr was the only thing I could still use. Two thirds of "Shiva's" hitpoints had now been distributed over my

battered limbs — all twenty-four of them, which was admittedly a joke considering the sheer numbers of the incoming enemy I was about to take on. Ditto for mana, which put a lid on any potential spell use.

Still, I couldn’t help it. I had to make do with what I had.

I took up the sword, sensing its destructive force swell in my hands, and prepared for my last battle.

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Chapter 19

IF YOU'RE SMART ENOUGH to take a preliminary stock of your strengths and abilities and use them wisely, you're doomed to succeed. The important thing here was to approach the issue with a critical mind, leaving emotions out of it.

Admittedly, in my case I had to make certain concessions regarding this philosophy — starting with the "preliminary" part and ending with "leaving emotions out of it".

Which was why, to tell you the truth, I was quite prepared to die here and now. I wasn't angry at all. I'd already vented all the anger I could have had. All I had left was pain, a nauseating weariness and maybe also a certain degree of displeasure. Talk about a stupid death. I used to imagine my end somewhat differently.

I braced myself for the guards' storming of the shack. They should arrive any moment... right now...

But nothing happened.

Correction: judging by the sounds of the commotion outside, the place had dissolved in chaos and mayhem. "Outside" being the operative word: whatever was going on, it had no intention of entering my cubby hole.

What might that be, for crying out loud? Could it be Gatekeepers meting out justice against Dhar Saadet and his rampaging henchmen? Somehow I didn't think so. The said Gatekeepers didn't appear too worried about the fates of the city teeming with desperate junkies always on the prowl for their next fix. Talking about which — could it be the junkies

themselves taking it out on their death-dealing don and his minions? That sounded more like it. The problem was, I'd only come across a couple of them on my way here — and both were in quite a catatonic state, unfit to get back to their feet, let alone fight.

What could it be, then?

As someone who's not in a hurry to vacate his earthly path, I decided to play it cool and wait to see how it's all gonna pan out. Still, whatever was happening outside showed no intention of abating. A roof clattered, apparently collapsing. I caught a whiff of smoke as something must have caught fire.

I also thought I'd caught a glimpse of the familiar haze creeping up the street. And no, it wasn't my imagination.

"Well, hello there!" Traug thundered, barging in.

Judging by the looks of him, he must have had a few. A few too many, probably. To be precise, his complexion was the intense blue of a roll of electrical tape. How he managed to stay on his two feet was a mystery.

"Quit stallin'!" Arts' voice came from outside.

"Think you can walk?" Traug asked.

"I could try."

"Got it. I'm not stupid."

He scooped me up in his arms like a groom carrying his bride and dashed outside. Despite the final stages of intoxication, he moved with an almost sober precision. Once a pro, always a pro.

So! All our gang was outside, present and correct, Litius included. Actually, I had several questions I might ask him — and judging by his

guilty eyes, he had solid arguments in his defense.

“Quick, come quick,” Arts kept urging while looting the mounds of dust: everything that was left of the attacking guards.

“I don’t think we should be in a hurry,” I said. “These were the only men Dhar Saadet had left, at least when I saw him last.”

“What happened to all the others?”

“Some dead, others wounded. It’s a long story.”

“I still think we should get our act together,” Arts said. “I have a bad feeling about this place.”

“Traug, do you mind?” I said as I turned my face away, unable to suffer his high-voltage booze breath for much longer. “You only have enough health left in you for a couple of binges, if that!”

“Don’t you worry about my health. I can still digest nails if I need to.”

“But what is this show all about?”

What they told me next was quite enlightening. Apparently, once we’d left Arts and Traug to wait for us by the Gatehouse, Traug wasn’t in a good way. He was beside himself with worry, torn by bad premonitions and trying to start after us, until he finally turned to the hip flask he’d brought along. Arts cursed himself for letting it go too far — but in doing so, she kept casting very angry glances at me as she played with her fiery staff. So she’d found it, after all.

Then, according to them, a strange thing had happened. As soon as the sky had begun to rip, the Gatekeeper left. Literally left, porting himself out via his own Gate. Remembering my instructions, Arts and Traug had stayed put, waiting for the Gatekeeper to return. But Litius was the first to

arrive with the blood-chilling story of the cable-fingered monsters' attack and our miraculous escape, followed by Dhar Saadet's treachery.

"Didn't you know who the guy was?" I asked Litius.

"As a m-m-matter of fact, I d-d-did. But drug dealers like him do a lot of b-b-business with other Players, selling them dope for t-t-ten times the price. And seeing as you had lots of m-m-money on you, I thought..."

"You think too much."

"It's your own fault," Arts said, talking Litius' side. "You shouldn't have leveled up Fame. Now you'll have to live with it. You were really lucky Litius went straight away to fetch us. Had it not been for this drunken layabout, we would have come much earlier.

"Okay, just forget it. What's with the 'drug dealers' in the plural? Are there many of them here?"

Not bothering to reply, Arts simply pointed at the city behind Traug's back. I turned round for a look and fell speechless.

What I could see from Dhar Saadet's windows was only the city gates and part of the city wall — but it was only because his mansion was close to the city limits. In fact, there were four more palatial mansions towering closer to the city center at respectful distances from each other.

"This city had long been taken over by drug dealers. They share it. In my hurry to save you, I approached the one who was the closest. You were in a very bad way."

"Can't say I'm feeling any better now. I can't wait to get out of this place, to tell you the truth."

"And what about Inturia?" Arts asked, her voice ringing with just a tad too much invested interest.

“What about it?” I parried.

“You can’t trust anyone,” Darkie raised his ugly voice. *“You never know who might be the traitor.”*

I didn’t reply. He might be right — “might” being the operative word. For all that I knew, the three attackers could have been lying in ambush for quite a while, waiting for me. Which broadened the number of potential suspects to quite a few, including Orael, Rumis, the crocman, and all of their sidekicks. How sure was I that my Dark alter ego didn’t have his own agenda? Was he trying to play me against my friends, by any chance, just as another tentative step to permanently take over my body?

Still, his words had done their dirty job, nurturing the seed of doubt in my heart. I needed to find out more before that tiny seed had grown into a giant poison ivy.

Thus ruminating, I studied the city lying before me.

To tell you the truth, it left a rather dreary impression upon me. The further we got from Dhar Saadet’s mansion, the more dismal the streets became, some of the shacks being just wobbly concoctions of sticks and mud. Even the city’s proximity to the highway did nothing to improve its attraction. This was one place you couldn’t leave quick enough, hoping to never have to come back here ever again.

The city’s only redeeming feature was a smattering of street vendors sitting by the entry gate. They all came with their own bodyguard or two. The vendors peddled in all kinds of junk from parchments to bizarre iron coinage of apparently magic nature. It occurred to me that they probably had nowhere else to go, otherwise they wouldn’t be sitting here.

And further on, flanking the giant arch of the gate, stood the Gatekeepers. Their powerful figures towered in their motionless awesomeness as if cast by some crazy genius blacksmith. I even got the

impression that they were taller than their brethren in other worlds assisting Players in their voyages across the Universe.

Driven by some weird gut feeling, I tapped Traug's shoulder, signaling for him to stop and set me back on my feet.

My leg hurt so badly as if it was being sliced in several places. Still, I managed a few steps, approaching one of the two Gatekeepers. Next to his impressive bulk, my own body — which probably looked equally impressive next to some Purg or Zverg — appeared comically out of proportion, like a little boy trying to impersonate a grownup goon.

I took out what few fragments of Inturia I'd picked up back in the maze and handed them to him. "Just in case you need this."

Then a miracle happened. The Gatekeeper turned his head in a closed helmet, looking first at me, then at the white crumbs of the rare metal in my hand. His gauntleted hand reached under my own. I poured the precious Inturia into it, then watched him transfer it into what must have been his own inventory.

"Thank you, Player."

You've helped Gatekeepers.

You've received a new title: Pilgrim to Anchor World, allowing you to visit the Central Worlds.

That was nice of them, even though I couldn't remember ever expressing any intention of ever going there. What I did need to do was find the place where those Chorul guys lived. Still, you didn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Apparently, sentimentality wasn't one of the Gatekeeper's fortes. Having collected the Inturia and meting out my reward, he regained his earlier position, freezing motionless by the city gate.

I patted Traug on the pauldron, urging him to get a move on.

He flung me back up like I was a loose feather from his grandma's eiderdown. 220 pounds were nothing to him. By some strange association, I remembered the "Shiva" with his off-the-scale stats. Whatever they said, leveling up had to be a Player's priority, even if only for health points to avoid a situation when you couldn't even activate your own development branch. That could be lethal.

We proudly swaggered along the uneven track, hopefully to never come back here again. Riding in the steely embrace of the fully armored Traug wasn't exactly comfortable, but asking him to remove his armor just for my convenience seemed equally stupid. He must have had his reasons to keep it on. Same applied to Arts who too kept marching on wearing her light armor.

"So what do you think about those three dudes that attacked you in the canyon?" she finally began.

Upon hearing this, Traug lost his footing and very nearly dropped to the ground, me and all.

"I don't," I replied. "They were following orders. We need to find the chief villain. Don't know how yet."

"Lish, give me the note again," Arts said.

Litius handed her the scrap of parchment covered in Archali writings. I'd completely forgotten to take it back from him.

Arts quickly scanned the text. "Preceptor Illus... Oh. As far as I know, there're only three worlds that use the preceptorship system."

"Five," Litius corrected her.

“Okay, five. So all we need to do now is find out who the hell this Illus guy is.”

“Yeah right. How hard can that be?”

“I can take c-c-care of that,” Litius said.

The parchment returned to me. I peered at it closely, as if hoping to glean some knowledge of the Archali language from it. All those strange letters and squiggly symbols written in purple ink.

Still, something definitely felt off. There was something about this message that made me uncomfortable.

“Any one of them could be a traitor,” Darkie whispered, then shut up again.

“I want us to stop at a place on our way,” Arts said. “It’s over there.”

She pointed at a cluster of ruins I’d glimpsed on my way here. By now, the city had all but disappeared from view, concealed by the wall and the tall arch of its gates which at this distance reminded me of a thin belt with a large buckle lying on the ground.

“Salet-akh-Erta,” Litius said under his breath when we entered the deserted settlement. “Just one of the many abandoned villages that used to surround Tyrolt.”

What a sad place. Time had done a good job on it, assisted by the incredible power of the cable-fingered monsters. Some buildings only had a single wall left standing while others were almost intact, their roofs only slightly damaged. For some reason, they reminded me of the Big Bad Wolf trying to get inside the three little pigs’ brick house. Only this particular wolf came from a world of monsters. I shuddered, remembering my earlier encounter with it.

We came to one of the least damaged houses. Its window and half of its roof had been ripped off but at least its door was still in one piece. Arts opened it, then proceeded to drag out a Purg guy bound hand and foot. She cut his legs free and hoisted him to his feet.

“Litius, take him,” she said. “Now we can go back.”

“Who’s this?”

“One of Dhar Saadet’s friends. Dhar Saadet sent him with the news of your arrival to his potential customers. Luckily, we stopped him just in time.”

We walked back to the road and continued on our way until we came to the canyon. Here Arts untied her prisoner with one final word of advice.

“You can return to your master now,” she said. “He might actually be grateful to you for not sending the word to any big time Players. Then he’d really have had big problems. Tell him not to try and look for us. And here’s just a little extra to add credibility to your story,” Arts added, jabbing him nice and hard on the cheekbone.

The prisoner dropped to the ground, holding his cheek. Still, he didn’t look offended. On the contrary, he backed off on all fours, scrambling to his feet and nodding his gratitude. No wonder: we’d spared his life, even though we didn’t really have to. Arts and humanism, that was an eye-opener.

“Well, that was stupid,” Darkie’s voice echoed my own thoughts. *“No body, no crime.”*

“Do you think you’re a resident voice in my head now?” I retorted, then promptly covered my mouth like a fearful child.

Still, none of my friends seemed to have noticed my emotional outbreak. Traug was the only one who raised a surprised eyebrow at my

bizarre gesture. Good. Which meant I didn't have to speak out loud every time I had an exchange of minds with my Dark alter ego.

"What's that now?" Darkie's voice grumbled unhappily. "Am I inconveniencing you? I thought I was only being helpful. Like saving your life, you know. Helping to get your ass out of prison. Getting a few useful tips across."

"Like what?"

"Like, your Avatars aren't a 100% stable. I get the impression they adapt to the changes in their environment. Remember your new Destroyer ability? You do realize, don't you, that the first owner of the Avatar couldn't have possibly had it? By the way, you were right in guessing it was Shiva. I personally think that the Game just keeps evolving, adapting as it does."

I too was beginning to get the impression that the Game's rules were basically just a set of conventions. Take the rule which said that traveling between worlds required obligatory assistance from a giant armor-clad medieval knight. Yeah right. I personally knew of a Player who'd killed a Gatekeeper and could still travel between worlds unhindered on his own whim. I bore witness to it myself.

Still, I didn't bother to reply. I just wasn't in the mood. Instead, I decided to check out whatever the "Shiva" had gained for the killings of the guards.

Chameleon (Agility). Allows you to completely fade into your environment, provided you remain motionless. Your current level of Agility guarantees a 50% probability of success when using this skill.

Dash (Strength). Allows you to instantly approach your opponent and knock them off their feet once per combat.

Your current level of Strength allows you to simultaneously stun two creatures.

Confusion (Illusions). Allows you to confuse your opponent, making them attack any creature nearest to them, whether friend or foe.

Duration: 10 sec

Range: 60 ft

Cost: 400 mana points

Attraction (Illusions). Increases your attractiveness to those around you. A short-term effect which can be used to advance your goals.

Warning! If you continue to interact with those affected by the spell after its expiry, their attitude to you may drop below its original level.

Duration: 1 minute

Use: on self

Cost: 200 mana points

Stream (Modification). Converts mana points to health points until your complete recovery or until full mana depletion, whatever happens first.

Use: on self

Cost: 300 mana points

Combustion (Modification). Sets you on fire which deals no damage to you while affecting your surroundings with the Element of Fire, dealing 20 pt. damage to all creatures around you.

Use: on self

Cost: 500 mana points

Wave of Fire (Destruction). Creates a directed fire outbreak which deals 70 pt. damage with the Element of Fire.

Width of the Wave: 30 ft

Use: away from self

Cost: 200 mana points

All these freshly-acquired goodies set me thinking. And as often happens, trying to think of many things at once can only put you to sleep. That's how I managed to fall asleep through our uneventful return across the canyon. My relatively undisturbed leg stopped threatening to shatter to smithereens with every movement, only reminding me of itself with a dull ache. All this combined, no wonder I dozed off.

My friends let me sleep right until their arrival at the Gate, and only because they needed my conscious consent to teleport. After a brief stopover in Purgator, we were already back home: the familiar frosty air, the cold stone of the Gatehouse and the torch flames crackling with the cold.

I was so confused I very nearly forgot to collect my keys and my wallet. Regular commoner life seemed to distance itself from me, rolling further away with every passing day. I wouldn't be surprised if I discovered, one of these days, that I had no need for human conventions any longer.

"I'll take you home," Arts said as we parted by the Community entrance.

"I'm a big boy. I'm quite capable of taking myself home," I said.

"What about your leg?"

"What about yours?" I snapped. "Are you my long-lost sister? Should we celebrate our reunion with a line dance Bollywood-style?"

Consumed by a sudden bout of distemper, I thought I heard a tiny little voice giggling deep inside me. “I’m a big boy,” I repeated. “I can take care of myself. See you tomorrow. Don’t try to do anything without me.”

My brief cab ride home went like a dream — literally. The cabbie had his work cut out for him pushing my irresponsive mortal frame awake.

At which point I regretted I’d ignored Art’s offer of help. Having said that, Traug’s would have been much handier here. All in all, my trip up the stairs took me a good twenty minutes laced with cussing, blasphemy and frequent stops. Finally, I barged into my apartment, very nearly ending spread-eagled on the hallway floor.

Instead, I found myself caught in Bumpkin’s fatherly bear hug.

“Sweet Mary, Mother of God! Who did this to you?”

“No one. Seriously. I was just walking down the street minding my own business and then this movie guy walks over and says they want to cast me for the lead part. And that’s it.”

“That’s it what?”

“They hired me to play in a Z-movie. I got the part of the main idiot. The one who always ends up killed halfway through the movie.”

“Judging by the state of you, the movie was a box office hit. The audience must have forgotten all about their popcorn.”

“You could say that.”

“Oh Master, Master. You really want to drive me into an early grave, don’t you? Come on, get your clothes off. All of them.”

Mixing groaned complaints with whispered words — he could be cussing or he could be praying — Bumpkin began collecting my discarded togs. I took a quick shower and staggered to the bed, collapsing onto it and instantly dropping into an uneasy sleep. I vaguely remembered Bumpkin trying to shake me awake, then pouring something down my throat, something so smelly and nauseating it just had to be good for me.

When I awoke, I felt relatively normal. Not perfect, just normal: the kind of state I'd describe as a mild hangover.

My leg only hurt when I tried to put my weight on it. "Hurt" being an overstatement: it just sort of ached as if I'd bumped it on something. Which was good news.

I had no appetite whatsoever. I only managed four large pancakes, spending more time staring mindlessly out the window and sipping my tea than actually eating.

I ignored my gym bag. Funny as it sounded, I added to the notorious statistic of those who give up training within the first month of buying a gym subscription. I didn't give a damn. I now had plenty of opportunity to vent my ire. Besides, I had more important things to do.

I opened my smartphone and entered my destination into the taxi app.

Bumpkin had already patched up my clothes as best he could. Actually, it didn't look too bad. A few patches, some long stitches here and there — but admittedly, all my posh airs were now gone, replaced by the aura of a tramp down on his luck. Besides, my trench coat's stats had dropped accordingly.

Destroyer Mage's Old Trench Coat

Adaptable to owner's level

+416 to mana.

+13% to damage from all Destruction spells used by the owner

+9% to absorption of all hostile Destruction spells

+7% to deflection of all hostile Destruction spells

Never mind. Could have been worse, I suppose. I pulled my long-suffering clothes on, hobbled downstairs and jumped into the cab.

Once I'd arrived and got out of the taxi, I realized that nothing had changed here. The place was less crowded though. To be precise, it was downright deserted. All the hoo-hah had ended, which was normal: the entire area next to the bridge had once again become the sleepy hollow.

I knocked on the steely gate, secretly hoping that the recent events hadn't prompted the building's inhabitants to move to a new address. When I heard the crunching sounds of footsteps on freshly driven snow, followed by the creaking of the door, I heaved a sigh of relief.

A Player I didn't know peeked out of the door.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "Wanna come in?"

So my title still worked, then. They hadn't stripped me of it after that wobbly I'd thrown.

"Sure," I said. "Is the Magister in?"

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Chapter 20

THERE'RE MOMENTS IN LIFE when we have to stop and review our respective philosophies. If we're wise and gracious enough, we might eventually become less judgmental, maturing into a more forgiving person tolerant of other people's blunders. Change is good for us. There's nothing static in this world — apart from maybe Ricky Martin's songs.

Similarly, my attitude to the Seers had evolved from "you won't see me dead in one room with them" to "these dudes could actually be quite useful". Don't get me wrong: I had no illusion in their respect; I didn't even feel too sorry about what I'd told Oliverio that night. I wasn't even ashamed of what I'd done. Because by now, my mind had turned into a hot tub filled with bubbling malice, with my Dark alter ego lounging in it — and that particular guy had no idea of shame or conscience by definition.

"I'm so happy you decided to pop by," the Magister said sincerely, apparently happy to see me.

"This is just a business call."

"It can't have been otherwise. Still, we were expecting you."

"I gathered that. You haven't stripped me of my Order title. Never mind. I helped you, so now I expect you to return the favor. I need some information."

I could have gone to the Guards, I suppose. My sister was with them now, after all, not to mention that other dude who helped me the other day. Besides, they sort of owed me for saving Cesspit, didn't they? So they might help me — but by the same token, they might not, and I wasn't in a position to hold them accountable.

Now the Seers were a different kettle of fish. They sort of owed me for real. So the only things I might have to swallow were my own pride and resentment. Which wasn't a lot for a Player who wanted to live long and keep on leveling.

Oliverio nodded. "Not a problem. We can find that out. We might need a couple of days to gather all the information but not more."

"Just text it to my phone. As soon as I get back here, I'll check it straight away. Here's my phone number..."

"We already have it," Oliverio replied with a soft smile.

I nodded and rose back to my feet. After a moment's hesitation, I proffered him my hand. He shook it.

Don't get me wrong: my opinion of the Seers hadn't improved one bit. But Oliverio was only a cog in the system — and a sympathetic cog at that. Besides, my calculating mind had decreed that staying on the Seers' good side would be useful in case of any further dealings with them. They didn't need to know what I really thought about them.

As I walked out of the room, I realized that none of the above had been my thoughts or my decisions. It was my Dark alter ego raising his ugly head again — while I'd simply gone along with his opinion.

"Logical," the voice said again. *"We're two parts of one whole, aren't we? We're bound to have similar opinions of certain things. Normal."*

"The problem is, I can't often tell where my part ends and yours starts."

Darkie giggled. *"That can't be so bad, surely!"*

I took a bus to the Gatehouse. I needed to focus and have a good think. My biggest dilemma was, how was I supposed to trust my friends — or not trust them, as the case may be — in the course of this upcoming gig in Mechilos? Was there indeed a traitor amid us — or was my Dark parasite simply trying to imprint this idea in my mind? The worst thing about schizophrenia is not being able to trust your own judgment.

And what was even worse, I'd already fallen victim to it. Which was why I entered the Community through the back entrance even though it was a good ten minutes' walk — but it was closer to the Gatehouse. I could find some solace in the thought that what I was about to do was relatively safe, I suppose. In any case, I was the only person who could negotiate with that particular Player. Still, I just couldn't shake off this constant pondering over a potential betrayal.

The Gatekeeper didn't acknowledge my arrival in any way. Not that I'd expected him to. Even if I possessed the highest possible title in their Order, something like the Supreme Patriarch of the Interworld Network, he would have still kept a poker face. Then again, I couldn't be too sure, simply because I was yet to see a Gatekeeper without his closed helmet on. These dudes were probably picked from the ugly pool. Then again, it was none of my business.

I teleported to the stinkiest town in Purgator, waited until I could use the Gates again, then headed for Mechilos. I even managed to get more or less where I needed. I loosened the trench coat — the place was as hot as ever — and headed for my destination, stopping occasionally to check my progress on the map.

Luber's settlement was much more impressive than that of Ufir von Urt. They even had some excuse for street lights here. I didn't manage to quite work out the light's nature: it could be magic or just good old electricity. The shacks were kept to the outskirts; the closer I got to the center, the more impressive buildings were.

To my surprise, I didn’t see many Kabirids. Lots of Purgs and humans, a handful of Zvergs and even a couple of Archali, of all people, thrown into the mix. How had they managed to survive here?

Much to my delight, no one seemed displeased with the arrival of a Cesspit native. All my work helping Ufir and earning my hard-gained title with the Order of Trashmen were now bearing its fruit.

It didn’t take me long to find Luber’s house. It was even more impressive than those of his neighbors, towering a whole story above them. The front door was decorated with a sign depicting a broken horn. Two Kabirid guards flanked the door. As soon as I approached, they made it clear in no uncertain terms that I was a bit too late for a guided tour. And that if I’d counted on one, I should have come back yesterday.

“I need to see Luber,” I said.

“Of course you do,” the Kabirid guard lowered his horns sarcastically. “You’ll need something really out of the ordinary to disturb the Lord at this hour.”

“In that case, you can tell him that I’ve brought him something I took off his brother’s dead body. And that I was the one who killed him.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 26.

Without saying a word, the Kabirid looked at his partner. They must have had telepathic communications in place. Then he turned and went into the house.

I didn’t have to wait long. Just as Ufir had said, Luber took everything concerning his brother very personally.

As I entered the house, I thought of Ufir again. I just couldn’t help comparing the dwellings of the two colony leaders — and the comparison was definitely not in Ufir’s favor.

Luber's house reminded me of a rich merchant's home, every room replete with silverware, precious rugs and hand-carved furniture. What I found even more remarkable, I didn't see a single speck of the wretched red dust which used to coat the whole interior of Ufir's own dwelling. No idea what it took them — they probably had to have the whole place polished several times a day — but this fact alone commanded a reluctant respect for Dendroid's brother. Who, at the moment, happened to be in the farthest room which apparently served as his office.

Luber was the spitting image of his brother. I'll tell you more: his horn was broken too. Only unlike his brother's which was completely missing, Luber could boast a quite substantial stump.

His development branch was quite interesting too. ***Breedster.*** I didn't even know this word existed.

"Take a seat," he motioned me softly to a chair.

Now that I was facing him, I could notice a few differences. For starters, Luber couldn't boast much in the height department. To give you some idea, he was even smaller than myself. His puny wings only made the situation worse as one of them was tilted much higher than the other.

"If you're wasting my time, I'll have to punish you," he said with the kind of calmness in his voice which made even Darkie stir uncomfortably. Whatever he meant definitely wasn't good news.

"Here," I awkwardly pulled out the heavy and cumbersome Dagger of the Thief of Atair, very nearly dropping it to the floor.

The expression in his eyes changed. That's the kind of look a cheetah gives to an injured antelope.

I promptly put the dagger back into my inventory. It wouldn't be wise to tempt him to simply take the dagger off me. I might be a Frequenter and

welcome guest for their Order, but better safe than sorry.

“Buren, leave us alone,” Luber said to the guard once he regained his composure. “So it was you who killed my brother?”

“That’s right.”

“How I wish I were there!” he said, throwing his hands in dismay. ‘Did he suffer?”

“You could say that. He burned alive while trying to transform from a tree back into a Kabirid. I don’t think it can qualify as ‘died peacefully in his bed’.”

“Oh,” Luber took a deep breath as if trying to smell the stench of his brother’s body engulfed in flames. “That’s music to my ears. Please accept my most heartfelt gratitude.”

You’ve helped the colony of Luber von Loont from the Uvane clan to get rid of their enemy.

You’ve received a new title: Friend

Allows you to count on the colony’s protection.

“You and your brother weren’t the best of friends, I presume?”

“Not the best of friends?” he chuckled. “You could say that! All our lives we’ve been bent on killing each other. See this?” he pointed at his broken horn. “Krutniss did this when our father died. He didn’t want me to become the head of the family. At that age, Kabirid horns are very fragile. They only harden at puberty. And that was the end of it. A one-horned Kabirid is an outcast, almost like a cripple. As soon as I was initiated, I was obliged to leave our world. I simply had no choice.”

“So you decided to settle down here.”

“That’s right. I found a few guys I knew and threw a colony together. I’m good at organizing people, even if I say so myself. And once I was strong enough, I hired a group of Archali to track Krutniss down and... no, I didn’t want them to kill him. They just broke his horn off too. Krutniss was in such a bad way he stayed in bed for two whole weeks. He was obliged to leave his family too. So he moved down here, and that’s how our vendetta began. By then, I’d gained a lot of influence as a Trashman, so he didn’t dare challenge me openly. Besides, I never gave him an excuse to. So he just lay low, waiting for his chance... and now he’s dead... I just can’t believe it,” his face slackened in a rather sinister grin.

Well, at least he’d had the decency to admit that there’d been no love lost between him and his brother. Some others might have shed a fake tear in his place, professing their everlasting loyalty to their sibling. To be honest, I found his honesty quite appealing.

“I want this dagger,” Luber said, staring me in the eye. “I’m gonna hang it above that door over there. That way I can look at it thinking of my brother dying a torturous death. That’s even sweeter that the Archali blood shed in battle.”

I smiled. “In that case, let’s discuss the price.”

“I can give you more dust than you can ever spend. I can make you permanently welcome in this house as if it were your own. I also can—”

“I got it. You can do lots of things. What I need though is information. And a title. But not with your colony.”

“Just say it.”

When I left him, I felt like I’d just shrugged a heavy army backpack off my shoulders. Which wasn’t an exaggeration, considering how heavy Krutniss’ dagger was. Even Luber had struggled to lift it. He might need quite a few heavy-duty screws to mount that monstrosity above the door.

But that was irrelevant. What was really important was spelled out in my interface in nice big letters:

You've helped Luber von Loont, a Supreme Lord of the Order of Trashmen.

You've received a new title: Welcome Visitor, allowing you to engage in trade in the territories controlled by the Order.

You've helped Luber von Loont, a Supreme Lord of the Order of Trashmen.

You've received a new title: Little Brother, granting you the right of vote equal to that of a regular Lord.

You've helped Luber von Loont, a Supreme Lord of the Order of Trashmen.

You've received a new title: Big Brother. Allows you to count on the Order protection regardless of the circumstances.

There were in fact two more titles superior to these — but Luber had dug his hooves in, saying he just couldn't promote me any further. He said this was already a lot of rank-skipping as it was. I faked mild displeasure, making it clear I'd counted on more, but eventually agreed to his offer because his Order's protection was exactly the kind of thing I'd come here for.

As for information, in the end it had worked out even better than I'd hoped. My Axiology jumped one point simply from taking a quick look at the map Luber had bestowed on me. Which was a detailed map of Mechilos which listed every nook and cranny up till the Fifth Order, becoming increasingly more vague and general after that. Which was normal: not many Trashmen had ever made their way to the higher levels.

In the end, we parted ways feeling more than happy with each other: Luber, because he hadn't had to pay me a single gram, and I, because I'd gotten that unyielding monstrosity off my hands. It was no good to man nor beast anyway, unless you were a Demented Shiva mutant.

Now I could finally go and have a good talk with one particular Purg I knew.

My return trip to Cesspit was uneventful to the point of being boring. Darkie kept a prudent silence. No one tried to kill or rob me; even Traug's house appeared quiet. Suspiciously so. The only explanation I could think of was that he was probably in the Syndicate by now, getting wasted.

I decided to go and see Rumis first. He was supposed to put me in contact with Letraine in case I'd managed to find Inturia. Apparently, the crocman had little faith in my success.

Rumis wasn't alone. He had a customer. A regular customer, I mean, someone gullible enough to buy a skill or a spell from his shop, providing a coverup for Rumis' main activities.

Seeing me, Rumis hurried to get rid of the uncomprehending client, seeing him to the door and asking him to "pop by later".

"Quit fussing about," I said curtly as soon as the shop's door closed. "You can tell your boss I've got Inturia."

"No! How did you do that?"

"How does one do anything? A bit of quick thinking, a bit of persuasion, a good dose of cheek... Nothing special. Just being myself, if you know what I mean."

Had Rumis been a computer, you might have had to reboot him now. His face froze in the ultimate degree of befuddlement, as if he was receiving a visit from a deadman killed by Rumis' own hand. I had to

produce the white piece of molten metal and show it to him which only made his condition worse.

“But this... that’s... it...”

“Have you been bitten by Litius or something? You can go and tell your boss I’ve completed my part of the deal. If he’d like to have a talk about it, I’ll see him tomorrow. Tomorrow night. You got it?”

“I... yeah... yes...”

“Good.”

I left the shop, quite pleased with the effect. I should get used to the fact that Serge could deliver on his goals. Okay, he might not have always come out of it unscathed, and have nearly died a couple of times in the process, but at least he got the job done.

I paused outside, pondering, finally deciding to pop into the Syndicate on my way to have a word with Traug.

There, events took an unexpected turn. Traug didn’t seem to be there. A rowdy boozer like himself was too conspicuous to go unnoticed. Arts, however, was there, sitting at a table with her back to me, busy talking to some Player. Her back completely obscured him from me, to the point where I couldn’t even discern his development branch.

“Not a word to anyone,” Darkie whispered.

So I turned round and left without saying a word.

Was it my imagination, of did I glimpse a shadow slide out of a dark corner to follow me? Wretched paranoia! I was obliged to stop to let the guy pass. It turned out to be that big dude from the other day, Shapeshifter, who had got the taste of my Combat Telekinesis.

I was about to raise my voice to him, knowing that his type weren't likely to leave these kinds of encounters unpunished — but he just grinned and slipped past. Weird guy.

Outside, my phone immediately began to play up, refusing to upload the taxi app. So much for modern technologies. I heaved a sigh and headed for a bus stop.

The street was remarkably deserted, even for a workday. To my growing amazement, the steel bench in the bus shelter was empty too, not a single old lady perched on it.

Then it dawned on me that the street was remarkably quiet. Not a single car had gone past.

What a familiar scenario.

I cast a couple of protection spells on myself and reached for the Gramr. To my chagrin, as soon as my hand closed around its hilt, Darkie began to stir too, as if waiting for a signal to take my place. No wonder: he drew his strength from the Gramr, didn't he?

I walked out onto the road, watchfully studying the buildings around me. Had they wanted to shoot me, they'd have already done so. What were they waiting for, then?

I cast another look over the street, more closely this time, making full use of my Observation Skills, and nodded to myself.

"Come out," I said. "I can see you."

Yes, I could see him — or should I say *them*, because Shapeshifter came out to my call, followed by three more Players. I glanced at their name tags, checking their development branches. Nothing extraordinary, just regular small fry. Had they really intended to attack me? Didn't they know who I was?

“Hurry up,” said a short dude who was apparently an Acolyte. “The Drape won’t hang forever. I bet he can’t fight to save his life without his tricks.”

“Slayer!”

A bank of freshly driven snow reared up into the air as a new Player materialized next to them.

I knew, of course, that sooner or later we might have to meet him — or even cross swords as the case may be. Still, the Red Horseman didn’t seem in a hurry to engage.

Oh well. If the mountain won't come to Mohammed...

I forced Darkie to keep still as he thrashed around, trying to break out of his prison, and went unhurriedly toward the five Players frozen in anticipation. Time for someone to die.

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Chapter 21

THERE'S AN OLD ADAGE containing in a nutshell a whole wealth of commoner wisdom. Here it is: Life doesn't happen *to* us. It happens *for* us. In other words, instead of adapting to our constantly changing circumstances, we need to reshape them to accommodate our own needs.

Take this situation, for instance. So I was ambushed. The most logical thing to do would be to defend myself, striving to survive. Or poor old Serge, everybody wants a piece of him... what's that if not victimhood?

Instead, I tried to see this situation in a totally different light. Five opponents — and at least one of them an experienced God-level Player, literally. Don't know about the rest of them, but this dude at least must have had some very interesting Avatars on him, as well as abilities and spells.

By now, I was all but running toward my opponents. Still, I instantly realized it was Darkie putting thoughts in my head. He may have failed to take over my body — but he was still capable of affecting my mind, for some reason. Between him and that wretched sword...

I forced myself to walk slower, studying my opponents. Screw you, Darkie. You know where you can shove your dreams of a blitzkrieg.

I could see straight away that the Red Horseman had no intention of jumping into the fray himself. He just stood there, meting out orders in a soft voice. All the others, however, sprang into action.

Acolyte cast some blanket protection spell which wound its defense vines around each of their group. It looked like some powerful stuff which must have cost lots of mana — and equally useless against my Gramr. Then again, how were they supposed to know it?

So, Slayer aside, we had the following actors impatient to see the color of my cloth: Shapeshifter, Sandman, Metallogenerant and Acolyte. The latter was pretty clear: he was just a support class, unlikely to join the battle. But what about the others?

My opponents were only too happy to oblige my curiosity. Predictably, Shapeshifter stole the show. With a wave of his hands, he rapidly began to grow, his skin turning green, until he was half as big again. Incredible Hulk, eat your heart out. Judging by the impressive fangs and his overall countenance, he must have transformed into an orc: hadn’t I seen one of those creatures at a funfair in a certain Elysium town I won’t mention?

I was so consumed by this opportunity to watch a free circus trick that I very nearly missed a rather accurate shuriken throw that came from Metallogenerant. Tall and dry as a fallen leaf, he continued to launch more shurikens at me, producing them from his hand at one-second intervals. Had he been taking them out of his inventory, he wouldn’t have been able to do it so fast. He was definitely generating them himself, the bastard. With all my agility, I failed to dodge a shuriken which came spinning right toward me.

[∞]

It's true that offense is the best defense. So I decided not to reinvent the wheel.

The Dark Avatar wrapped itself around me like a second skin. I ran toward the attackers, activating Disarmament on the go.

The expression in Metallogenerant’s eyes was priceless as he stood there with two newly-minted shurikens in his hands, unsure what to do with them. To make it even better, Sandman was standing right next to him, his sword already drawn, the same silent question written all over his face.

Just as I'd decided I might kill both of them with one blow, the one who was closer to me — which was Sandman — crumbled to dust. Not the deathly kind of dust, if you know what I mean, but rather a pile of sand which whirled up into the air and hurried to scamper away.

Never mind. I'd have to make do with killing the other one.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Metallogenerant****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Scare spell.

This Player crumbled to dust for real, his powdery remains floating down onto the snowed-in road. Sorry, dude. This is what happens when you mess with the wrong guys. Even his admittedly special development branch hadn't helped him. Slayer aside, he'd definitely been the most dangerous opponent of the entire bunch — but he was no match for my Dark Avatar.

The greedy Gramr in my hand turned hot with his blood. Darkie chuckled, pleased with my first success. Although he was still trapped within me, I could sense his approach as he drew nearer to the invisible barrier which kept him in check.

Thus preoccupied, I missed a Godawful punch to my solar plexus. That was the orc which had completed his transformation in the meantime and was now impatient to show me what his race was capable of. Which was fair and square, if you think about it. He hadn't used any weapons, only his own fists. If I hadn't had Blanket cast over me, I would have gotten the full dose of it. As it was, I flew through the air, seeing showers of stars and deafened by the ringing in my own ears.

Your Unarmored skill has increased to level 12.

Almost immediately, I very nearly received a second helping of the same from Sandman who'd re-materialized from the heap of sand he'd turned into. He must have worked out that the best strategy against me was kicking me nice and hard, something I was strongly opposed to.

[∞]

Having received Shapeshifter's jab, I managed to roll aside just as the pile of sand transformed back into a human being, landing an almighty kick at the empty space I'd only just vacated. Having realized that his opponent was one Speedy Gonzales, Sandman turned back into a pile of sand which started moving toward me. How can you possibly stop someone comprised of millions of the tiniest grains of sand?

Actually, I had an idea.

My recent transformation to Shiva and the fact that my trench coat had been reduced to tatters had had a bad effect on my maximum mana cap. Between that and the fact that I'd only just cast protection on myself, I barely had enough for the spell I had in mind.

I took a step to my left to make sure that the spell grazed the orc as well, then cast Wave of Fire.

Snow hissed underfoot, evaporating. Flames danced around, adding their glow to the half-light of an overcast winter afternoon.

They called it a Wave for a reason. Its incandescent surge rolled toward my enemies, bristling with flares of fire. What a sight to behold; shame it didn't have the damage to match.

Still, it proved enough to sort out Sandman. Not enough to vitrify him, of course, but enough to harden the sand, melting it together and forcing him to transform back into his human shape. And there I was, waiting for him with my Gramr.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Sandman****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Barrier spell.

It was a strange sight. Still not completely human, Sandman froze in mid-transformation, then crumbled to dust.

I swung toward the orc. The wave of flames only licked his green skin as it surged further on, finally breaking against the wall of the nearest house. The wall turned black with the unbearable heat which covered the first-story windows with a thick coat of soot. No idea how poor commoners were going to explain this phenomenon. Not that I cared. I had a much more interesting thing happening here.

Shapeshifter must have realized that his orc form wasn't the best option against someone who could rewind time. He didn't' hesitate. His body shrank; two brilliantly white wings shot out of his shoulders; his hand closed around a sword hilt.

Aha. So he'd decided to attack me from the air. Still, why did he have to transform into an Archalus instead of, say, a Kabirid?

Admittedly, I quite liked his development branch. You could shapeshift into a Purg, sneak into a Purgator fortress and sell its secrets to the highest bidder, be they the Archali or the Kabirids. Talk about a perfect spy. But that's provided the fortress' defenders didn't have anyone with the Insight ability.

This was the wrong moment to ponder, anyway, because the fake Archalus had already taken to the sky and was diving right at me, basically leaving me no choice. Lability wouldn't have made much difference here. That way or the other, I'd be obliged to rewind time again anyway. The

problem was, I had very few charge points left, so I decided to take no chances.

Actually, Shapeshifter wasn't that good after all. He went for me, trying to make up in force what he lacked in skill. He dealt me a slashing blow — which was way too heavy, if you asked me, and which I managed to dodge. The blade ripped through my long-suffering trench coat, glancing off my ribs. Bumpkin was gonna kill me. If it went like this, my magic coat would soon be reduced to a pair of underpants.

The momentum of the blow sent Shapeshifter into a spin. I recoiled, reasoning that the blow wasn't serious enough to justify another time rewind.

"Did you see that?" Shapeshifter asked, for some reason addressing Slayer instead of me. "He's run out of charges."

Only when Slayer went for me did I realize the entire gravity of their design. Slayer must have hired them to deplete me of my charge points, waiting for me to run out of time rewinds. Only then would he step onto the scene... and his time seemed to have come.

They were flanking me now, Shapeshifter in his Archalus form coming for me on one side and the Red Horseman grinning wide at me from the other. Which was a bit too cocky of them. I still had two time rewinds for the two of them — plus something else stashed safely up my sleeve, perfect for certain Horsemen who thought they were jockeys.

"Let me do it!" Darkie strained in a desperate attempt to set himself free.

"Stay where you are," I firmly cooled him down as I activated Suppression.

In an ideal world, it should have slowed them down at least 50%, but even this seemed to have done the trick for the Red Horseman, not to

mention his Archalus sidekick. Before Slayer could realize what had happened, he was already upon me — even in his current state, he was still pretty fast. But he made the same mistake that Hunter used to berate me for.

Every Player needs to learn how to use their weapons properly first, without reverting to their development branch and its tricks. Had I rewound time whenever someone had tried to attack me, I would have become perfectly useless the moment I couldn't use it. Slayer, too, seemed to rely on his speed alone. He was probably too used to killing his opponents with his very first blow — but now things weren't going according to his plan.

He must have realized it when I'd dodged his first blow and parried the second one. Still, I shouldn't have expected miracles. Slayer was still much faster than I was. His sword went right through my leg, leaving a bone-deep slashing wound. I was lucky I hadn't fainted, otherwise everything would have been over there and then.

[∞]

This time I easily parried his second attack — but my counterattack wasn't exactly successful. Or maybe it was. Depends on how you looked at it. Slayer had this habit of swinging his arms around him, which was something a fencer should never do. Predictably, another blow from my Gramr grazed his hand in passing, lopping off parts of his index and middle fingers.

Bawling like a scalded cat, Slayer leapt aside. Excellent. I could use a breather. Because the clock was ticking — and I didn't seem to be running out of opponents.

You had to look really hard to notice that Slayer wasn't as fast as usual — but as for Shapeshifter, it was now painfully obvious. It was fun to watch that giant fake angel struggle with every wingbeat as if in slow motion. I hurried toward him, keeping in mind I only had one time rewind left — and whatever happened, I couldn't waste it on him.

Even slowed down, Shapeshifter had no intention of giving up without a fight. Holding his sword in front of himself, he slowly turned toward me. Judging by his confident movements, he was exactly the kind of experienced fighter that Slayer wasn't. If I tried to attack him, I might not be able to get away with it. All I needed to do was disable him, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I tried to run circles around him, with immediate results. The shoulder of his wing was bare of feathers. Unhesitantly I slashed out at it, then sprang aside.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 26.

The sound was crisp like that of a cook's knife slicing through a celery stick. And what was even more interesting, the wing dropped down even before the bedazzled Shapeshifter could do the same. It just collapsed to the ground, disappearing into thin air, while the Archalus began shapeshifting back into a human being.

That got me really curious. I'd love to know how his development branch worked. What could trigger his reverse transformation? A wound or just a bout of pain, maybe? Probably, the latter.

Still, I couldn't afford musing about it right now because Slayer was already back to his tricks. He must have realized that I was trying to employ the good old "divide and conquer" rule, so he unhesitantly went for me.

By now, blood was flowing freely, mixing with the melting slush around us and coloring the once pristine white street a deep burgundy. Blood trickled off Slayer's wounded hand; more blood soaked through one skirt of my trench coat making it heavy and unyielding; even more blood spread around Shapeshifter like a growing dark stain as he tried to climb back to his feet.

"Watch out!" Acolyte shouted from the wings, dashing to Slayer's help.

Slayer startled, momentarily distracted. I jumped aside just in case, to make sure they didn't try and flank me. Having said that, Shapeshifter didn't look as if he was capable of flanking anyone. Acolyte was trying to help him to his feet, whispering something in his ear and casting wary glances in my direction. So at the moment, I only had Slayer to take care of.

He seemed to be pretty unhappy with the partial loss of his two fingers. So unhappy in fact that he continued to advance, throwing caution to the wind. I really can't say I liked it. I just couldn't be everywhere at once. Whenever I blocked a blow, I just wasn't fast enough to block the next one. A rather serious wound in my left shoulder added to the existing one on my side.

Now that Slayer had seen my blood and realized he was winning, there was no stopping him.

"Let me do it!" Darkie kept screaming from within me.

I clenched my teeth until my vision darkened. I really didn't like the intensity in my Dark alter ego's voice. Surprisingly, I was quite calm and confident of being able to do it on my own. A lot had happened in the last twenty seconds — but very soon Suppression would stop working while I was still awaiting my lucky break.

Finally, it came.

Slayer lunged at me, fully intending to impale me on his sword. Actually, he even managed to do so. The only thing was that I survived it. Now he'd have to finish me off. And that required too many complex movements. He'd have to pull the sword out of my body, then take another swing... all of this took a lot of time. In the meantime, I could give him a dose of his own medicine.

[∞]

Slayer's sword met thin air as I took a step to my right. As for Slayer himself, the momentum of his lunge made him impale himself on my Gramr. The blade sank up to its hilt into his body with remarkable ease.

Slayer stared at me, amazement in his gaze, apparently not expecting to see me so close up.

"Kill him! Just kill him!" Darkie screamed.

"Shut up!"

"Let me out, I'll do it myself!"

"Get lost!"

I couldn't even tell whether I was shouting at him mentally or out loud. My body spasmed in a powerful seizure. My face must have distorted in a grimace because the expression on Slayers face changed too. He was scared. Not the horror-movie-and-popcorn kind of scared, but real scared, the kind that comes with a smell.

That was what brought me back to my senses, albeit briefly.

My Dark alter ego was throwing a fit. He was like an infuriated tiger thrashing around a flimsy bamboo cage, his fury fueled by everything I had at my disposal: the Avatars, the Gramr sword, the fury. Everything was against me.

My sword hand quivered, trying to point the hilt down. The Gramr could cut through flesh like a kitchen knife through molten butter. Which meant that Slayer had only seconds left to live.

Then I had an epiphany.

Darkie wasn't in full control of my body quite yet — but this death would make him much stronger. And you can't feed anger. Just like you

can’t feed fear.

I took one look at Slayer, the oldest of Players, staring at me with his pants full, and knew I’d already done what I’d come here for.

The sword disappeared from my unyielding hand as if it had never been there. I may not have had full control of my hand, but I still had control over my inventory.

And as soon as I’d done it, Darkie doubled his mental attack. I did my best to ignore it, my veins bulging, the vessels in my eyes bleeding with the strain. Bloody tears trickled down my cheeks.

I used my left hand to grab Slayer by the throat and said softly,

“I want you to swear on the Game that if I let you go, you’re gonna get your ass out of Cesspit and will never try to hassle me or my friends ever again.”

“No!!” Darkie roared in impotent fury.

“’xcuse me?” Slayer managed, uncomprehending, without taking his eyes off my bloodied face. Apparently, all his mental powers had been spent on the process of defecation, switching his brain to standby mode.

Still, it didn’t take him long to get a grip. He began nodding non-stop, mumbling something about a nice quiet world he could go to, stuttering and making very little sense.

“I want you to swear the Oath,” I repeated.

“You idiot!” Darkie kept raging. *“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t let him go! He’s an enemy! And he has all those Avatars! They would make us so much stronger!”*

“Swear the Oath,” I repeated, struggling to contain my Dark alter ego.

“Y-e-es... of course... I swear on the Game that I...”

The Red Horseman of the Apocalypse, the scourge of all commoners on planet Earth, haltingly began to swear his Oath, anxious and frightened, trying hard not to look me in the eye — as if he could see something deep there, a blood-curdling monster you just couldn’t escape. Which was basically how it was.

I groaned softly, trying to suppress the wave of otherworldly fury that was flooding over me from within. I managed to hear him out till the end and waited for the glow of the Oath to envelop him. Only then did I let him go.

“It’s in your own interests to get the hell out of here quickly.’

The Red Horseman obeyed my order. He darted off as fast as he could — considering the slippery slush beneath his feet, the stab wound in his stomach and the weight of his full pants.

I didn’t need the Oath to know he wouldn’t be coming back. He’d seen something within me which must have broken him. Him — a Horseman, a God. The one who’d destroyed creatures just for fun, who craved blood and believed himself to be a ruler of destinies.

I’d just killed a Horseman without killing him. We both had.

Shapeshifter and Acolyte, too, proved to be wise enough to make themselves scarce. Acolyte scampered away, helping his friend along, until they had all but disappeared round the corner. I’d won this battle.

Actually, I’d won this entire campaign. With the exception of someone who seemed to strongly oppose my show of humanity.

“You idiot! You’re gonna regret it! I’m gonna send you to such a shithole that you’ll never get out of it!”

I knew he was right. I had no more strength left to resist him.

Just before Darkie finally fought his way free — the moments before I'd ceased to exist — someone laid their hands on my shoulders.

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Chapter 22

IT OFTEN HAPPENS that our path in life, no matter how wide and comfortable it is, takes us away from the main road, forcing us to part ways with someone who used to share it with us. Your co-author starts working on their own ideas; your business partners share out the company assets and strike out on their own; your children fledge the nest and get on with their own lives. Nothing is permanent. Once a successful cooperation ceases to bear fruit, it dies a natural death.

So my Dark alter ego had decided he'd had enough playing second fiddle. And if the truth were known, few were in a position to argue with him. The strange thing was, I was still around — and judging by the pain which had recently become my faithful follower, my body wasn't very far away, either.

The graze wound in my side hurt like hell; my shoulder echoed it. My ill-fated leg showed no intention of knitting, either. Why couldn't it cooperate for a change and mend itself nicely already?

I opened my eyes.

I was in a small room, partitioned off with white screens bearing large signs of the red cross. Some sort of hospital, apparently. My trench coat was folded on a chair next to my bed, together with all my other clothes.

I was clad in some excuse for a nightgown covered in a pattern of tiny blue blossoms. Although the wound in my side didn't have any stiches, it had already closed. My shoulder was relatively okay too.

Magic! The question was, who could have been kind enough to pick up my unconscious body and patch it up?

I peeled off the stupid gown and hurried to get dressed.

Only when I was pulling up my pants, I froze halfway, realizing I couldn't hear Darkie's voice anymore. I just couldn't sense him at all, as if he'd disappeared from my head.

"I wish it were so. But unfortunately, he's still there. All we did, we temporarily tranquilized him, for want of a better term."

I swung round to the sound of the voice, forgetting I was still standing with my pants around my ankles. As I hurried to pull them up, I stared closely at a Guard's masked face.

"That's a consolation, I suppose," I said. "Thanks. How did you manage to do that?"

"We used a certain magic sedative — which, I must admit, cost us a pretty penny. Come on, we need to talk anyway. We need to decide how to go about it now."

"What do you mean?" I asked, donning the trench coat.

Still, the Guard — whose development branch was apparently **Lightning Rod** — had already left, leaving me no option but to follow him.

The building was weird to say the least. An endlessly long corridor was lined by dozens of locked doors with tiny observation windows. Guards scurried past, looking all businesslike, ignoring the occasional calls of Players peeping into the corridor through their windows.

"When do we get our grub, boss?"

My Guard ignored the question, striding emotionlessly on.

"What's this, a prison or something?" I asked.

“Absolutely not. Just a detention center. The nearest prison is in Navaga. Or, as commoners call it, the city of Sochi[3].”

“Why in Sochi?”

“Because of the climate. Subtropical paradise. Few want to escape from there.”

We reached a staircase and began climbing up.

I covered my eyes from the blinding light. Now I knew where I was. These were the Guards’ barracks: the long building just next to the Sachem’s residence. I could see the bunkbeds behind a curtain in the room’s far end, a few long benches and two small rooms with heavy doors.

The Guard beelined for one of them. As he motioned me inside, he spoke softly to another Guard who happened to go past,

“Get me Amphet, will you?.. And you, Serge, please take a seat.”

The room didn’t boast a big choice of seats. There was a wooden chair next to a desk, facing away from the window. Plus two more: one behind the desk, the other next to the door. Was this supposed to be an interrogation?

“I’m all ears,” I said.

“Serge, please. Leave your jokes out of it. Your Dark sub-identity is asleep but it doesn’t take much to awake it. Any bout of anger, or another drop of your karma, or a new Dark Avatar that comes your way — all this would undo all the work we’ve done on you.”

“Thanks a lot for your help, I do appreciate it. I still don’t understand what’s in it for you.”

“We keep Cesspit’s interests in mind, that’s all. Or did you really think that the Seers hadn’t been monitoring your mental state? They have, and they really don’t like what they see.”

“Not the Seers again.”

“That’s irrelevant. The problem is, you can’t handle it on your own anymore. The way I see it, it’s simple, really. You need to get rid of your Dark sub-identity. The easiest way to do so would be by bringing your karma back up. But even in that case, we admittedly have our reservations...”

“Like what?”

“We’re afraid that another sub-identity might replace the current one, a positive one this time. Your mind has been subjected to extreme duress. And it would only get worse over time. Like a dormant volcano sitting atop a hot spot of incalescent magma, your sub-identities would continue living their own respective lives — until one day the volcano might begin to erupt. Whatever’s gonna happen to you then and who is gonna take hold of your mind is a question we can’t ignore.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“I’m afraid you’re not gonna like the answer. You need to get rid of your Avatars. And also of those of your weapons that might prompt your Dark sub-identity into action. Plus you need to refrain from all acts that might increase your Dark karma.”

“Oh great. Can I still breathe?”

He ignored my question.

Someone knocked on the door. A new Guard entered — a trainee this time, judging by the color of his mask.

“Did you want to see me?” he asked timidly like a schoolkid entering the principal’s office.

“I did indeed. Take a seat, Amphet.”

The trainee took the remaining chair, casting wary looks at the Guard and glancing curiously at me. Despite his mask and his flowing robes, I could tell he was nervous. He fidgeted his fingers under his robes, occasionally rubbing his knees, while I was wondering about his development branch which was **Transnet**.

“Tell Serge what you did,” the Guard said.

“The idea of my development branch,” the trainee began, “is the ability to send creatures into a trance. It can be done for a variety of purposes, like painkilling. This is how we treat gravely wounded Players, by shutting down their brains, if you wish.”

“A bit like an induced coma?” I offered.

“The only difference is, our method is way safer,” the Guard butted in. “We can wake the Player up at any given moment.”

“So Darkie is in a coma now, is he?”

‘This Darkie — is he your sub-identity?” the Guard waited for me to nod, then continued. “Yes, he’s been put into an induced trance. It’s a good job we arrived just in time. Amphet sensed the presence of another identity within you and decided to sedate the more aggressive one.”

“He did the right thing. But somehow I don’t think I can just thank him and walk out of the door, can I?”

“I’m sorry to say that but, as I already told you, the safety of Cesspit comes first. You’ve helped it a lot — but by the same token you just might

become the instrument of its undoing. If this Darkie, as you call him, manages to fight his way out, his further actions might become impossible to predict or even control. In which case our Order will be obliged to declare you an outlaw."

I gulped. Here we go again. Don't get me wrong: I really didn't want to open this Pandora's box only to watch Darkie have his way with this world. But by the same token, I couldn't give them a 100% guarantee of it never happening again.

An outlaw. What did that mean, exactly? Would they deport me? Then again, how would Gatekeepers know? I could come back any time, anyway.

I thought of all the cells downstairs. If they called this a detention center, what was their real magic prison like?

"Still, there's another option," the Guard went on. "As I've already explained to you, Amphet here is capable of sustaining your so-called Darkie in a permanent trance. But we're not omnipotent. Amphet only has enough charge points to last him 24 hours. Which means you'll need to come back here every day in order to keep blocking your sub-identity, allowing Amphet to—"

"In other words, you want me to sign in every day like an offender on parole," I interrupted him.

"All I'm doing is offering you a way out of this situation," the Guard continued impassively. "This way we could satisfy all parties involved. Once we find a better one, we'll let you know. The Order is already allotting you too much effort and attention as it is. If you absolutely need to know, Amphet will work exclusively with you. He just won't have enough charge points left to help his colleagues out."

He fell silent, eyeing me closely. I returned his stare, pondering over what he'd just said.

On the one hand, I really didn’t like being forced into such constraints. Which was exactly what these were. Basically, this was a little short of an ultimatum.

I say “a little” because he hadn’t openly told me to get the hell out of Cesspit had I failed to accept their offer. In order to do that, they’d have to wait for Darkie to manifest himself. But that didn’t change the gist of it. They’d offered me a choice when there was actually none.

“Does that mean I’m now tied to this world?” I asked.

“Not really. But if you’re interested in keeping your Darkie in check, you’ll have to come back regularly. You could make your home in Purgator or even Qird, but once every twenty-four hours, you’ll be obliged to—”

“... I’ll be obliged to come here and sign in before the clock strikes midnight, or my head will turn into a pumpkin, is that it?”

“No one’s forcing you,” the Guard said, his voice flat and weary.

I suddenly realized he was only a human being, just like myself. He may have been a Lightning Rod, but he was sick and tired of his job. He probably had loads of other things to take care of while he was sitting here trying to reason with me about something that didn’t even require explanation.

For a moment, I even felt ashamed.

“Deal,” I said, rising to my feet. “But that’s only until I find a way to bring Darkie under my control.”

The Guard gave me a long look, as if trying to say that I already knew how to do it quickly and easily. So I hurried to add,

“I’ll try to think of something that doesn’t require me dumping those Avatars or altering my karma.”

“Very well,” the Guard said, shaking my hand without much enthusiasm. “Amphet’s sessions don’t take long, anyway. A minute or two at most. That’s actually why he’s here now.”

“Wait a sec. I thought you said I had to do it once every twenty-four hours?”

“That’s right. And it’s been twenty-six hours and,” he glanced at his watch, “thirty-seven minutes since we found you. You’re already overdue.”

“Oh shit! No way!” I jumped to my feet and almost made it to the door but forced myself back. Two minutes weren’t going to change anything. Besides, I really needed to put Darkie to rest properly this time.

“Okay, Mister Amphet,” I said. “You can do your thing. I’m in a bit of a hurry, that’s all.”

The Player nodded and rose to his feet, motioning me to sit back down.

His hands touched my temples. A cold, unpleasant touch. Still, I tried to blank the discomfort out as he massaged my temples softly and unhurriedly, completely ignoring the fact that I was in a hurry.

Still, my patience had its limits. I had an appointment to make — and the creatures who were expecting me weren’t the kind you would like to let down.

“Are you gonna do your thing or what?” I asked Amphet.

“One moment,” he replied, adding a few circular motions. “That’s it for today.”

“No way!”

No idea what extraordinary changes I must have expected, but I didn’t feel any different. I was still the same Serge Demidov: a bit too smart for my own good, judging by the kinds of mess I always ended up in, but stubborn enough to rectify their consequences. My memory wasn’t erased; my perception hadn’t improved; and no, my nipples hadn’t swollen.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “Don’t forget I’m working with your alter ego. My actions don’t affect you in any way.”

“Can I go, then?”

“Just one moment,” the Guard rose to his feet too. “Allow me to steal just one more second of your time. Here, take this.”

He proffered me an opalescent brown crystal. Not a very big one, which meant that whatever skill or spell it contained wasn’t that cool or rare. Still, who am I to say no to charity, provided I’m at the receiving end of it? So I didn’t play hard to get.

The crystal disintegrated in my hands. I nodded to myself. A skill.

Friendly Beacon (Fortitude). Allows two Players to locate each other, provided both are in the same world.

Warning! The beacon activation requires both players’ consent.

Your current level of Fortitude allows you to simultaneously create two beacons.

“All right... it’s better than an ankle bracelet, I suppose.”

“All this is for your own good. If, for some reason, you find yourself unable to visit us here, this will allow me to find Amphet and send him directly to wherever you are.”

“Sounds like VIP treatment to me. What’s next, almond-eyed beauties tickling the soles of my feet with peacock feathers?”

“We’re more interested in keeping you stable than you are yourself. May I have your hand, please?”

You could mistake his handshake for a formality, had it not been for a new system message that appeared below,

New Friendly Beacon: Time Master — Lightning Rod

Accept/Deny

“I won’t be able to find you unless you express a desire for me to do so,” the Guard reassured me.

“So how do I activate this thing?”

“Just press the Beacon icon. Here you are! I can see you on my map now. When you want to disable, all you need to do is press it again. That’s done, then. Now I’d like you to describe your attackers.”

Although he made an effort to speak quickly, time seemed to drag. Courtesy of Insight, I was able to give him the names of the Players’ development branches which for them were like fingerprints. He reassured me that my attackers would be placed on the worldwide wanted list, and that they had everything under control. With that, this cross between an interrogation and shrink session was finally over.

I shook their hands again — formally this time, no magic tricks involved — and let Amphet see me out. I rushed out of the building, thanking every God that my appointment was so close to their barracks.

I’d been asleep for twenty-four hours! I dreaded to think what my friends must have thought. Or Bumpkin.

Still, I had no time to worry about them. The approaching night had already lit up the streetlights, extinguished the candle of the setting sun and was making itself comfortable, tossing and turning between its snowy eiderdowns. While I, idiot that I was, had very nearly missed everything. I could only hope that Letraine had enough patience not to give up on the whole thing.

He was already at Rumis' place. The two dudes flanking the front door were his bodyguards from the last time. Only this time they were deadpan serious, not a shadow of a smirk on their faces. They let me in solemnly, casting watchful glances over the street. Logical: it was them who'd missed the arrival of my cavalry last time.

"It to-o-o-ok you a whi-i-i-ile," Letraine hissed by way of greeting, pacing the room impatiently.

Before taking a vacant chair, I cast a wary look at his enormous crocodile tail covered in giant scales. The atmosphere in the room was so tense you could cut the air with a knife — to the point where I began to doubt if the thing in my possession was indeed what they wanted. Was it even worth me bothering this high-flying company?

"Inturia," Orael reminded me.

Admittedly, his complexion was similar to that of a steel works foreman who'd just been told one of his workers had fallen down the furnace. They really hadn't expected me to come back, had they?

I felt somewhat offended even. "Gentlemen, allow me to remind you that you swore an Oath, promising to help me steal Farhall while dealing no harm to either me or any of my friends."

"Cut the crap, hu-u-uman! My pa-a-atience has its limits!"

With the flourish of a magician delivering a Swiss watch from a hat, I produced Inturia. The chunk of molten metal, once lost for good within the maze, glowed dazzlingly bright in my hand.

Orael gulped. Rumis held his breath. As for Letraine, he all but burst into tears as he took it in his hands.

“We’re sa-a-afe now, Orael! We’re in the cle-e-ear!”

He studied it closely, not in a hurry to put it away, as if it were Kandinsky’s finest canvas.

I kept smiling, feeling a bit out of place here, like a choir boy invited to a Columbian drug lord’s birthday party. Letraine showed no intention of ever coming down to earth, so eventually I decided to seize the initiative.

“Now back to our deal,” I said. “My friends and I need to know how to get to the Highest Order of Mechilos and steal Farhall. Allow me to remind you of your word...”

He waved my reminder away as he secreted Inturia in his inventory. “I remember my word, human! Howe-e-e-ver, there’s a slight problem there...”

“Which is what? I’ve done everything right, haven’t I?

“Orael, tell him.”

“Well, you see, Serge, we’ve had a bit of a new development we should keep in mind,” Orael began. “Letraine has had a minor disagreement with the Manager of the Fifth Order...”

“Beca-a-a-ause the man needs to know his pla-a-ace!”

“Which led to some inconveniences, if you know what I mean. The said Manager tried to impinge upon our business, creating all sorts of

stumbling blocks and basically being a nuisance, trying to stop deliveries. That's not a big deal, really. We should be able to handle him, no question about that. He has no idea what he's up against..."

"Stu-u-upid snotnose," Letraine echoed.

"So what's I got to do with it?"

"Everything. Until we manage to sort him out, we can't visit the Top Orders. Too many eyes watching us."

"So how long will it take you to sort him out?"

"A month of two."

"A what?"

I was so angry I pushed the table in front of me so hard I very nearly knocked it over.

Something heavy stirred within me, like a fast-asleep drunk who mumbles and slurs in his slumber. I forced myself to calm down. Having to rot in Cesspit for another couple of months while trying to keep Darkie in check with the Guards' help wasn't going to be easy, that's for sure.

"There's another option," Orael said, looking not at me but at Letraine as if he'd just had an idea.

Judging by the crocman's uncomprehending stare, Orael wasn't faking it. Everyone's eyes were on him now, save poor Rumis still frozen in his zoned-out state.

In the meantime, Orael hurried to offer his plan. "If someone does indeed steal Farhall, that could switch their attention away from us, couldn't it? If they make a big deal about it, we could even frame one of the Managers of the Fifth Order for it and—"

“You seem to be confusing cause and effect,” I interrupted him. “How can I possibly steal the Farhall if I can’t get to the Highest Order?”

“Regular creatures can’t,” Orael’s eyes lit up as they searched my body, finally focusing on my wounded left arm. “But mechanoids can.”

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Chapter 23

THE MOMENT YOU THINK you've been around the block a few times, there's always someone who might surprise you. Which isn't bad provided the said surprise is good news. Still, in my experience, surprises normally come with a negative sign, like a flasher in the park or a crazy hoarder neighbor.

Which was more or less my reaction to Orael's suggestion to have my arm cut off. Correction: to replace it with a bionic one. Not that it changed the meaning of it. He wanted me to replace a perfectly healthy albeit lightly wounded limb with a prosthetic.

I couldn't find words strong enough to express what I was feeling. I almost lost it — but immediately, I sensed something heavy and dark stir within me. I forced myself to calm down.

"Human, you've no ide-e-e-ea what you're missing! We'll fix you with all the right paperwork! You'll become a citizen of Me-e-e-echilos!"

"Exactly," Orael butted in with the air of a market wife praising her wares. "A citizenship and a residence permit—"

"Awesome," I interrupted him. "But even if I agreed to having my arm replaced — *if*, I said! — how am I supposed to get to the Highest Order? You're not allowed there either, are you?"

Orael and Letraine exchanged meaningful glances. Then they smiled — or rather, the corners of Orael's mouth barely twitched while Letraine bared his croc's teeth in a broad grin.

"The stricter the law, the more ingenious are those who want to break it. We already have a few guys with a limb replacement who now move

freely across the whole of Mechilos. The reasons they're only a few are because firstly, these kinds of services are quite costly, and secondly, because it's in our own interests not to have too many mechanoids doing shit where they're not supposed to be.

"You haven't yet told me how exactly you do it."

"We'll place a special projection device into your artificial arm. As soon as you approach the security scan, it'll self-activate, distorting the information on the screen to create the impression that your body is literally packed with implants. Unfortunately, the sheer size of the device requires an entire limb replacement. It doesn't have to be an arm; we could replace one of your legs if you wish. Makes no difference to us."

"I don't suppose it does. It's easier to take it off than to put it back."

"But you'll get a bionic one instead. That's what a lot of people do, have their real limbs replaced with artificial ones."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Keep in mind that this is more than a generous offer. You could say that you won the jackpot. The surgery only takes a few hours. We have four well-equipped surgeries in the Tenth Order. You won't feel a thing."

"As I said, I'll have to think about it."

"You don't se-e-e-em to realize all the benefits..."

"I still have to think about it."

"It's your choice," Orael said nonchalantly with the look of someone who'd done all he could. "Just try not to think about it for too long."

I nodded and left.

What were they like? “Replace your arm!” Easier said than done. I’d had this arm all my life. I had so many memories with it. Even my very first sexual experience... er, never mind. And now they wanted me to swap it!

If the truth were known, I was just trying to put on a brave face. My mood was far from cheerful. Every problem, whether solved or put off, seemed to breed a new one. Or sometimes even several, adding to the heavy load weighing my shoulders down.

“Now why doesn’t that surprise me that you’re still in one piece? I think I know the answer. Players with a conscience like yours tend to live long.”

I raised my head, almost bumping into Arts. She stood there with her arms and legs akimbo, making it perfectly clear that someone was about to get a full broadside. Not me, of course, because I could simply rewind time.

“You’re not gonna believe it,” I said. “I just crawled into a nice warm hole and dozed off for twenty-four hours.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe you.”

“Well, you should. Because that’s how it actually happened... almost.”

“Here I am beside myself with worry. Not to mention poor Bumpkin.”

“Yeah right. You’ve done all the morgues and hospitals in town, have you?”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Come with me,” I took her by the elbow and dragged her to the Syndicate. I’d already made up my mind.

The Syndicate was still living its tipsy laidback life. I sat at the table next to the billboard. Strangely enough, I wasn’t thirsty. Or had that

Amphet guy put my bad habits to sleep together with my Dark alter ego? That would be good.

Arts was still cold like a lump of Icelandic iceberg and as unassailable as Bamburgh Castle. I drew closer to her and quietly began narrating everything that had happened to me from the very start. I just couldn't keep it to myself anymore. I needed someone whom I could share it with. Because I was terribly tired of it all.

Arts listened, sometimes pallid, other times biting her upper lip. Now and again she'd open her mouth in order to say something but just continued listening in silence. Her face betrayed a whole array of emotions, not one of them positive.

"Gosh you're an idiot," she kept whispering grimly. "Why didn't you say anything? If I'd have known any of this from the start, I would have... I... I..." she paused, unable to come up with any decent way of rescuing my butt.

I told her nothing about my suspicions regarding her. Not that I didn't trust her — because in that case, I wouldn't have told her anything. I just didn't want to offend her with my — or rather, not exactly my — suspicions. It was Darkie who'd put them in my head. And as soon as he'd been put to sleep, I'd immediately felt a bit better.

"You must get your karma back up," she said. "Right now. And you need to get rid of that sword."

"Yeah right. In case you haven't noticed, it's the only reason I'm still alive," I reached into my inventory, drew the Gramr's hilt out, then put it back. "This, and also the Avatars. And very soon, we'll also have to steal the Farhall, and I'd love that little op to go as smoothly as possible. Unfortunately, my gut feeling tells me that we won't be able to do it without having a good scrap."

“You got any idea how dangerous that is? I’m not talking about Farhall! I’m talking about you!”

“I know. If something really goes wrong, I’ll simply cease to exist. Darkie will replace me. He’s gonna shove me deep inside where he is right now.”

“Exactly. And seeing as the Guards have decided to be so accommodating — no, don’t interrupt me,” she said, confronting my skeptical glance, “they indeed tried to accommodate you. So all you need to do is wait till you can collect the stone — and then you can start thinking about upping your karma and getting rid of this Darkie creature for good. Provided it’s even possible.”

“What you’re saying makes perfect sense.”

“Serge, please. Don’t even think about this wretched arm replacement. We have plenty of time. You shouldn’t have any dealings with those you can’t really trust. Please be cautious.”

“That’s something I’ve always wished I’d been. Let’s just forget it for the time being. You wanna see what the Guards just gave me?”

I reached into my interface. Now I did have the Tuition that Darkie had so demonstratively rejected. Which meant I could transfer skills — or sell them, to be precise. Which was exactly what the Game had already told me.

Your current level of Tuition allows you to set up the cost of passing on the Beacon skill at 600 grams of dust.

Would you like to pass on the Beacon skill to Player Arts?

Yes / No

How much?! Either the Guard's Tuition was maxed up or the Order had money to burn — one of the two. Not that it was a lot of money, considering I had more than three kilos to spare. But it had essentially put a lid on my plans for starting up a cozy little business selling spells and skills.

"Oh wow," Arts said. "The Guards have really put themselves out for you, haven't they? I've never seen anything like it."

"Do you mean that Guards can create new skills?"

"Why does that surprise you? It's a really old Order. They're obliged to have someone who's leveled Creation to 100. Which comes with the ability to create new skills and spells. Within the limits of one's intellect and imagination, of course. How does it work?"

I shook Arts' hand. Then we took turns "summoning" each other. Whenever she activated the beacon, I saw a glowing dot on my map which pinpointed her position with reasonable accuracy. Google Maps, eat your heart out.

"All right," I finally said. "I'm off. Where're the others, by the way?"

"Litius helped me to look for you. He called me a couple of times as he tried to locate you using his own channels. As for Traug, he just keeps drinking like a fish. Ever since we came back from Atrain, he'd gone completely out of control. We never see him sober these days."

"I might pop in to see him," I said. "I've got to come back here tomorrow anyway, to do my bit signing in," I pointed at my head. "We could get together, all of us, and have a chat. We've been too busy running around like headless chickens just lately."

She nodded. I could see she wanted to add something but she appeared to be lost for words. For some reason, it made me feel uncomfortable. No matter how hard I'd tried, there was still this suggestive

ambiguity between us. However, I had neither the desire nor the strength to clear the air right now.

As I walked past the billboard, I saw several new missions pinned to it. To be precise, I'd noticed them already while sitting at the table as the familiar names of development branches had caught my eye.

Helg

Presumed development branch: Shapeshifter

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: attacking a Player

Sentence: detention. In case of resistance, use whatever methods of self-defense available.

Location: Nizhny Novgorod

Reward: 500 grams

Valecris

Presumed development branch: Acolyte

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: attacking a Player

Sentence: detention. In case of resistance, use whatever methods of self-defense available.

Location: Nizhny Novgorod

Reward: 500 grams

Slayer *(also known as the Red Horseman)*

Development branch: Nimbler.

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: the killing of great numbers of both Players and commoners

Sentence: death

Location: Nizhny Novgorod

Reward: 15 kilos of dust

I chuckled. The prices had gone up, apparently. His head had been worth much less last time I'd checked. And judging by the mission's red color, it had already been claimed by lots of people.

And still I just couldn't shake off the funny feeling that Slayer wasn't in town any longer. He might have already left Cesspit for all we knew. Despite the Guards' monitoring of the nearest Gate and the flyback drivers' depot, Slayer must have slipped through their nets.

It was actually better for me this way. He wouldn't provoke Darkie out of his slumber. As for his two sidekicks, I could bet my life they were lying low somewhere.

Almost mechanically, I pulled the two pieces of paper off, claiming both. I just had a gut feeling that our paths were bound to cross again in the future. Helg and Valecris, yeah right! Sounded more like common-or-garden Oleg and Valery to me. Then again, who was I to talk? My very own attempt to "Gamify" my humble Russian name could only fool a complete idiot.

As I rode a cab back home, staring at the buildings' brightly lit windows, I was beginning to regret my being a Player. All the common people were now in the evening mood, waiting for their loved ones to come home from work, having dinner and reading bedtime stories to their children. Bound to one world and one life, they were still happy. And I, who had the entire Universe lying at my feet, I wasn't interested in anything anymore. Even the Choruls whom I'd been so desperate to meet had lost a lot in their awesomeness. My curiosity about them was still there — but the desire to satisfy it was gone.

So I focused on checking out the two spells I'd just received, seeing as I had a bit of time now.

Barrier (Modification). Allows you to materialize a random object. The object's size depends on your current Modification level.

Use: long-range

Cost: 50 mana points

Scare (Sorcery). Allows you to mentally affect sentient beings in order to provoke them into uncoordinated and erratic actions. Can't affect the creatures whose Sorcery level is higher than that of the caster.

Use: long-range

Cost: 150 mana points.

Honestly, that wasn't much to write home about. I'd had better drops in the past. Still, that was enough to render me so absent-minded that I even forgot to pay when I'd stepped out of the cab. I hurried to offer the cabbie a brand-new crispy note — but even my generous tip failed to lift the frowned disapproval from his gaze, leaving both of us with a bad aftertaste from our brief encounter.

"Good evening, Serge."

The voice was familiar — but I just couldn't put a name to the face I was looking at. This must have been Professor — probably. Closely shaven, his sodden jacket replaced by a neat overcoat over a clean and pressed suit. Even not exactly dressed for the weather, he looked decidedly dandy. He had a cake in a box in one hand and two bouquets in the other.

"Good evening," I grumbled.

"You've got a hole in your trench coat," he said, nodding. "I've been out to the shops, as you can see," he lifted his hands, demonstrating his acquisitions. "Sorry, I can't chat with you now. My two daughters are coming to see me. I'm nervous like a first-year student before his first exam. Have a nice evening!"

I held the front door for him. He thanked me, then dashed up the stairs like a teenager.

Oh well. Looks like I'd managed to help someone, at least. Done my good deed to show for my life.

I staggered to my apartment door and opened it, admittedly not without some apprehension. Still, the place was quiet. No signs of any disorder — but by the same token, no sign of Bumpkin, either. So much for his waiting up for me like an anxious parent.

I peeled off the trench coat and climbed into the bathtub.

As I gingerly lathered my wounded arm, the earlier conversation came back to me.

Have a bionic one, they'd said. Thoughts could barely move inside my head, heavy and unyielding like boulders — sad thoughts, grim and despondent even.

You've lost quite a bit of weight, I said to myself. Sharing a body with the villainous version of yourself doesn't come easy, does it?

A melancholic Korl looked back at me from the mirror, forcing a smile. Well, at least he tried.

I didn't bother to warm any meals, just poked a fork at some cold potatoes, then went straight to bed. How weird: despite having been sedated for the good part of twenty-four hours, I didn't feel any stronger for it.

As soon as my head touched the pillow, I sank into deep sleep, punctuated by anxious dreams of me trying to walk toward the familiar figures in flowing robes. They were calling my name, apparently wishing to tell me something — but someone kept pulling my hand in the opposite direction. I was digging my heels in, unwilling to go, but whoever it was kept dragging me behind him, far overpowering me. And when he finally stopped and turned to face me, I saw that it was me all along.

I sat up sharply on the unfolded couch, wiping away sweat. So much for me having some rest. Admittedly I felt slightly better thanks to this brief shut-eye, but the bizarre anxiety that had haunted me in my sleep was still here.

My trench coat hung on the chair next to the bed, all patched up. Which meant that my prodigal house goblin was back. My clothes weren't strewn all over the floor anymore but lay neatly folded on the aforementioned chair. I caught a smell of something nice wafting from the kitchen.

In other words, arise and shine! Still, my lingering anxiety kept gnawing at me, as if something bad was about to happen.

And it did.

"Serge?" Darkie's voice asked. *"Serge, where am I? What happened? Why is it so dark here? What have you done to yourself? What*

have you done to both of us?”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. Warily I rose to my feet as if Darkie could follow my movements. He continued to shower me with questions, but I really wasn’t in the mood to reply. Even though I wasn’t sure he could read my thoughts in his current state, I had no desire to provoke him.

“Aha! Master’s up already!” Bumpkin began, walking in — then promptly shut up, obeying my commanding finger pressed to my lips.

I must have looked a sight: a stale fruitcake clinging desperately to his last crumbs of sanity. I wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

At least Bumpkin played along admirably, not uttering a word as I got dressed and left. Still, I had a funny feeling that had he had a number for Game 911, he’d already be on the line to their shrinks.

Only when I dialed a cab did I realize I’d completely forgotten to wash my face or even brush my teeth. Still, I had much more important things to take care of than personal hygiene. Apparently, my mind wasn’t as responsive to Amphet’s ministrations as it should have been. Having Darkie roam the nooks and crannies of my mind was better than nothing, I suppose — but wasn’t he supposed to wither away in a glass coffin until Amphet had administered another dose of his sedative to him?

The Community was languidly coming back to life after the cold night. The streets were almost deserted — which at the moment played right into my hands. Not because Guards were more accessible at this hour — or no. I had no intention of going back to them. What could they tell me, anyway? “Yes, sorry, it looks like our remedy doesn’t work as well as it’s supposed to, so how about we lock you up for the sake of public safety?”

No, I couldn’t do that. It was time I took the matter in my own hands. I really needed to bring my Karma back up. In order to regain some semblance of control over Darkie, I had to rejoin Light. It was this or die.

So I headed for the familiar little shop in the very last street next to the Gate.

Despite the early hour, Rumis already had a customer. Still, it had already become his habit to get rid of any clients the moment I showed up. Now, too, he saw the early-morning spell lover to the door, then turned to me, making it clear he was ready to hear me out.

“I’m in,” I said.

“Pardon me?”

“Tell Orael and Letraine I agree to their offer. Tell them they can fit me out with their bionic arm and projection device. I want them to know it ASAP.”

“Anything else you might need?” Rumis asked eagerly as if impatient to oblige.

“Yes. Please take a piece of paper and write it down. I have some provisions I want them to meet.”

“If I may ask, what exactly could have forced you to change your mind?” the Spell Modifier gave me a long close look while reaching for a sheet of parchment from the nearest desk.

“Just some new developments. The thing is, now I can’t afford to wait another couple of months. I might not have the time.”

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Chapter 24

LIVING IN CONSTANT EXPECTATION of a disaster to strike can be excruciating. Eventually you begin to jump at every little sound, recoiling from your own shadow. Now I could understand those criminals who turned themselves in: the expectation of a knock on your door is much more torturous than the actual punishment.

Still, this was the kind of life I lived now, permanently stressed out. It took Letraine and his gang all of three days to fulfil one of my conditions: namely, that the arm replacement surgery was to be performed in Cesspit. Or rather, it took Rumis three days to talk Letraine into accepting it. In the end, the traffickers agreed to teleport all their medical equipment via the Gates and set up a surgery here — but seeing as they had to do so inconspicuously, that meant even more waiting.

I also had to come to an agreement with Amphet, too. He was my only chance of keeping my mind secured in my own body. I was seriously concerned that the surgery might provoke Darkie somehow. As it was, he didn't feel too unhappy even now, safely locked up within my own mind.

"Are we going somewhere?" Darkie's voice asked sarcastically. *"Never mind, don't bother. I can hear all the street noises. Let me guess. Are we going to the Community?"*

I didn't reply, too busy doing what I was now doing most of the time, namely pretending he didn't exist. The trance that Amphet kept casting on him was getting weaker every time. If at first it had lasted all of twelve hours, by now I was lucky if he could put my Dark sub-identity to sleep for six or seven at the most. Although Darkie was still "blind", he wasn't deaf anymore, even if unable to read my thoughts, so he jumped at every opportunity to strike up a conversation.

“Don’t you think you go there a bit too often?” Darkie went on. *“It’s not a job, you know.”*

It took all of my self-control not to snap at him. Picking quarrels with Darkie meant making him stronger. Then again, my neurotic state did a good job of that too. My Dark side fed on my own negative emotions, whatever they might be. You can easily imagine the extent of it if I tell you that even Bumpkin, the epitome of patience in a house goblin, tried to give me a wide berth these days. Even worse: my jitters seemed to rub off on him too, judging by three broken plates, a chipped tea cup and a Teflon skillet scrubbed raw with wire wool.

“Hi,” Traug said, standing up to greet me as soon as I’d entered the Syndicate.

“Hi yourself.”

I took a chair between him and Arts busy doodling in her album. After a brief while, Litius joined us too, bringing an armful of beer jugs from the bar. He poured it out. The beer was fresh, the smell heavenly. We clinked our glasses and set about drinking.

“Lish, what did I say? I asked you to get some pale ale. And this is amber.”

“But they smell almost identical,” Litius hurried to explain.

“Traug, please, give him a break,” Arts said, lifting her head from her album. “You know beastmen have a problem with colors. How did you want him to tell the difference? You should have lifted your lazy backside for a change and fetched it yourself.”

I could tell that this extended delay grated on my team’s nerves too. They must have felt as helpless as flies stuck in crystallized honey. Now, too, they started bickering between themselves — not so much with actual

spite but rather because they had nothing better to do. Last night, for instance, Traug had picked a fight with an Abbas because he didn't like how the guy looked at him. Told him he was too grim for the happy hour. The only thing that had saved him from facing the guards was my generous tip to both the barman and the insulted Abbas in question.

I produced the scrap of parchment that Litius and I had procured in the canyon. By now, I was beginning to understand a bit of Archalish. I could already tell a squiggle that apparently meant "half". The one that forked down stood for "a human being" A straight line meant "a Player". And so on and so forth. This allowed me to read the Archalus message without even leveling up Linguistics.

A half-blood Korl/human cross, fair hair, tall, known in Cesspit and adjacent worlds. Entourage: a Korl by the name of Traug, a young human female called Arts and a catman known as Litius. Wanted alive. Signed: Preceptor Illus."

"Will you stop staring at that stupid paper?" Arts snapped. "It's not gonna show you anything you don't already know!"

"I'm not so sure," I admitted. "Something seems to be off. Like something's missing, but I can't put my finger on it."

"By the way, they've arrested those other dudes," Litius chimed in. "The ones that were with Slayer. I saw some Players redeem their missions today."

"Well, let the Guards deal with them, then," I said non-committally.

For some reason, their fates didn't worry me in the slightest. I didn't consider Shapeshifter or his sidekick a good match for myself. Half-decent sparring partners, if that.

Silence fell at our table, only disrupted by the occasional clinking of glasses as Litius and Traug indulged in their favorite pastime, trying to

drink each other under the table. With that, the day fell into predictable routine.

Not for very long though, because just then, Rumis stumbled into the Syndicate.

I could tell he had trouble walking. His mechanoid parts definitely needed replacement, while Letraine was apparently too busy doing other things.

“Hi,” he said. “Serge? May I?”

Ours was a strange relationship these days. Where before he’d treated me with badly concealed contempt, barely able to tell me from the endless stream of his other clients, these days he was reverence himself.

I got up and moved to a table next to ours.

With a conspiratorial air, Rumis produced a small map on a piece of parchment and handed it to me. As soon as I’d crumbled it in my hands, I discovered a new addition to my own map: a red dot not far from the Zarechnaya metro station, just behind the market. Judging by the fact that some of the map wasn’t covered by the fog of war, I must have been there at some point before — but I couldn’t for the life of me remember the area.

“The preparations are complete,” Rumis added. “Our experts will arrive in a couple of hours. We can get it done today.”

I nodded, trying to suppress anxiety.

“What are you up to?” Darkie demanded, apparently not too happy with this new development.

“My friends will be there with me,” I told Rumis, ignoring him. “I don’t need to remind Letraine about it, do I?”

“No. He remembers. Orael will stay with them. He’s the one to oversee the procedure.”

“What about Letraine?”

“He can’t make it, I’m afraid.”

Strangely enough, the crocman’s absence set my alarm bells ringing. Why couldn’t he make it? But never mind. Amphet would be there with me, anyway. I counted on him more than anyone else.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll just wrap it all up and come straight there.”

With a nod, Rumis hurried to make himself scarce. He’d done what he’d come here for. I could have sworn he’d breathed a sigh of relief the moment he’d left me. Can’t say I blame him.

“Wait for me,” I told my friends. “I’ll be right back.”

By now, the Guards’ offices — the long barracks just next to the Sachem’s house — had already lost their aura of mystery to me. I went there every day almost like clockwork, waited for Amphet to complete his manipulations, then left to mind my own business.

Most Guards knew me by now, and I knew them. Although I couldn’t see their faces, I could tell them apart by their development branches. The squat muscly dude was a **Water Dowser**. I’d even Googled it: a very interesting specialization, even if not exactly a combat one.

The tall spindly dude with skinny arms was apparently an **X-Rayerist**. This was another very interesting specialty. I wasn’t even sure if he was safe to stand next to. What could he see, anyway?

And the one minding the barracks’ front door was **Ice Ridge**. He was apparently the local bodyguard. I could even see Lily, my sister, lounging

about next to one of the dorm doors. She was probably waiting for a friend. She didn't come here often.

I didn't say hello to her — mind you, she too kept a deadpan face (if you can say that about a mask), intent on not showing that she knew me. The Guards probably weren't supposed to exhibit any personal preferences: their job didn't allow for any favoritism.

Lightning Rod was sitting at the desk in his office. As I'd gathered, he was some kind of senior manager here. It looked like the Guards' hierarchy was very similar to that of normal human beings. Some pulled all the weight doing menial jobs while others pushed pens for a living. No idea what their top brass did. I was yet to see any. Not counting Lightning Rod, of course, because he wasn't rank and file, either.

"Hi, Serge," Lightning Rod said.

His voice rang with fatigue. I got a distinct impression that no one was really happy to see me just lately.

"Hello," I said. "Can I see Amphet, please?"

"Why, is your Dark side giving you grief again?"

"You let me get out of here!" Darkie's voice pronounced. *"You'll know all about grief then!"*

"No, not at all," I hurried to lie. "It's just that today, I need to be away on a trip. Didn't you say it could be arranged?"

"What are you up to?"

"Just need a bit of a break from my usual routine. I'm just afraid it might trigger my Dark sub-identity off somehow. So I'd really love Amphet to be around. Don't you appreciate my responsible attitude?"

“Are you sure you’ve told me everything?” Lightning Rod asked. “Somehow I don’t think so.”

Still, he activated Beacon and summoned Amphet.

It took him a good forty minutes to arrive. He barged into the room, panting and sweaty. I was obliged to clue him in, keeping the finer details to myself, for several reasons. Firstly, Lightning Rod was unlikely to appreciate what I was up to. Secondly, I was afraid that Amphet might dig his heels in and refuse to oblige. And thirdly... because by now I was sort of used to lying — or should I say, I was used to being economical with the truth.

“When do you want us to go? And where to?”

“We’re going now. I’m gonna show you the way.”

Amphet cast a quizzical glance at his boss who nodded his agreement.

“We’d better move it,” I said.

You should have seen the expressions on my friends’ faces when I sauntered into the Syndicate with Amphet in tow. Litius left his beer alone, his eyes wide open in surprise. Traug started rubbing his hands on his pants, for some reason, while Arts stared at me in a frowned bemusement.

I didn’t bother to introduce Amphet to them. “This officer kindly agreed to accompany us to make sure that my poor head didn’t lose any more screws.”

Darkie chuckled. *“If you say so.”*

“Now let’s not waste our time on niceties. We’re almost late as it is.”

As Murphy’s law would have it, whenever you’re in a hurry, the universe starts conspiring against you. Judging by the traffic map, the entire

bridge was jammed solid. The mass of red markers verged on throbbing. We were obliged to head for the bus stop and wait for the bus which predictably wasn't in a hurry to arrive.

When we finally got to the Gorkovskaya metro station, a cop stopped us for an ID check. How could it be otherwise? I had to use Smoke and Mirrors which left him staring into open space, completely confused.

As we rode the metro, I took out my magic mirror and used it to check how commoners must have seen us. The sight very nearly sent me rolling on the floor. Amphet was a Goth clad in black leather; Arts a pretty little thing dressed like a model; Traug a grim skinhead. Litius alone looked relatively normal, not a catman but a pleasant young man with distinctly Slavic features. Me, I was my usual wussy self. No wonder we attracted unwanted attention.

"You guys know how to use Camouflage?" I asked.

Everybody nodded back.

"So that's what you should be doing now," I said.

I'd only calmed down a little when we'd walked out into the street. We were almost there. The house we needed was just behind the market.

A sudden memory flashed back. I recognized the place. It was all over the news at the time. A gas explosion, if I remembered rightly. The inhabitants got new housing, while the building itself stood abandoned as unfit for human habitation. For some reason, they hadn't torn it down yet, leaving it to rot behind a low fence, its paneless windows gaping, its green paint peeling.

I followed a trail of fresh footprints toward a hole in the fence. Correction: the fence here appeared to have been ripped apart by an inhuman force. The once-sealed front door had been torn off its hinges only recently, judging by the absence of snow in the hallway.

Which was where Orael was waiting for me.

“We’ve got some interesting visitors,” he said with a smile.

Immediately his already-handsome looks became downright saccharine. Of course. He was using his racial ability to impress newcomers. Admittedly, his charms didn’t affect me that much anymore.

“You have a problem with that?” I asked.

“Oh no, not at all. Come in. Our experts have already set up their equipment.”

“What kind of equipment?” Darkie and Amphet asked in unison.

“You’ll see,” I said, addressing Amphet alone.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor, then entered the apartment closest to the stairwell. It must have been the biggest and the emptiest — but it looked like Orael still wasn’t happy with its size because one of the walls between the lounge and a bedroom had been torn down.

I was beginning to wonder how on earth they were supposed to perform microsurgery in a filthy place like this. My arm began to ache, voicing its agreement.

That’s when I saw the sphere.

Or whatever it was. Almost completely transparent, it surrounded a chair like those used in dental offices, only infinitely more hi tech. I had no idea what half of those devices were.

Three Players stood next to it: a Purg who was apparently a **Metabolite,** and two humans: a **Patcher** and a **Technocrat**. All of whom were mechanoids, to various degrees. Patcher had had half of his skull

replaced. His other eye was weird too, reminding me of a jeweler’s eyeglass.

A large gurney stood next to them. The thing that lay on it must have been my prosthetic arm, bristling with hundreds of the finest wires.

“Our best experts,” Orael said, pointing at the surgeons.

“To what do I owe the honor? All this must have cost you a pretty penny.”

“Letraine was against all this, but I insisted. In this case, the ends justify the means.”

“Wait a sec,” Amphet said as it dawned on him. “This surely isn’t an implant surgery...”

“Not at all,” I cut him short. “I just fancied having myself circumcised. I don’t trust regular clinics, you see, so I asked to get me some real pros from a real pro world. But seriously, we’re not breaking any of Cesspit’s laws, are we? Mechilos yes, it’s a different story. But the Guards don’t really care what happens there, do they?”

Amphet looked puzzled to say the least. This wasn’t how he must have imagined our little stroll. I was obliged to adlib because I needed him desperately now. He needed to keep an eye on me while I convalesced.

“Your boss knows about this,” I added. “We could, of course, use Beacon to summon him here, just to be on the safe side.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 18.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 27.

Without saying a word, he nodded. Better than nothing, I suppose. I brought my lips to his ear, telling him when exactly he was supposed to step

in.

Then I headed for the sphere.

“Would you mind taking your clothes off?” Metabolite said matter-of-factly.

“All of them?”

“I actually meant your upper torso. But if you get your kicks from indecent exposure, be my guest.”

My trench coat ended up on the floor, followed by the sweater. Actually, it wasn’t that cold here at all, considering it was winter. Could it also be magic? Possible.

I was a bit concerned about the their sterility standards. Still, the moment I stepped into the sphere, I got my answer. As my body forced its way through the invisible power barrier, my skin literally began to flake, crumbling into tiny little scales. Dammit. So much for my morning shower.

“First we need to amputate your limb,” Patcher began. “I am the one in charge of organic surgery. My colleague here,” he nodded at Technocrat, “is a reconnection specialist, responsible for the prosthetic’s adaptation to your body. And finally, we’ll accelerate the healing process,” he nodded at Metabolite, “to ensure your arm’s speedy recovery. That’s the gist of it. Would you mind if I turn the music on? It helps me concentrate.”

“If you think it helps, be my guest.”

Patcher nodded to Technocrat who produced a portable USB speaker and a memory stick. Two presses of a button, and the sphere — as well as the whole room — filled with the familiar sounds of Donna Summer’s *I Feel Love*.

“Ooooh, it’s so good,” the legendary singer crooned. Me, I couldn’t agree less. Fear constricted my throat, to the point that I had trouble breathing. Despite the ambient temperature, my body erupted in goosebumps. They prudently buckled me in — and I fully appreciated their precaution.

“We can start,” Patcher dropped curtly. He must have been the one in command here.

Technocrat began by performing some strange manipulations with a whole bunch of steel pins, then nodded to the others. Metabolite produced a small mask which looked like a regular surgical one, only its fabric glowed with iridescent surges of magic. It must have been charmed.

He pressed it to my face. My vision swam.

“Oooh, fall and free, fall and free...” Donna Summer upped the ante, not knowing how right she was. I was indeed in freefall, tossed around my own mind like a sailor on deck in a raging storm.

And then... then it was over.

My return to consciousness was hard and reluctant. For me, only a few seconds had elapsed. The first warning sign was the change of music: the song was different now, namely *Boogie Wonderland*. This Technocrat must have been a real disco nut. That made two of us.

In the end, it wasn’t that bad. I’d half-expected to come round to agonizing pain. This was a major surgery, after all. It’s not every day you get your whole arm chopped off and a new one sewn on in its place. But no, I didn’t seem to feel anything at all. No tingling, no itching even. The Mechanoids’ medical science had lived up to its fame.

“How are you feeling?” Patcher asked.

I was about to reply when someone else grabbed the initiative. *“Not too bad, actually. There’s a certain discomfort, I have to admit...”*

“That’s what we call the implantation effect. It’ll soon go. Anything else?”

“No, nothing really. It’s okay. I just can’t believe it.”

“That means we’ve done a good job,” Patcher said with a smile, unbuckling me.

“Just a moment,” Amphet said, walking over to me. “I just need to do something.”

“I don’t think I’ll be needing your services,” Darkie said with a chuckle as he grabbed him with my free hand and hurled him against the wall.

Reaching for the Gramr, he sliced through the remaining restraints, then leapt off the seat.

Orael threw his hands up, about to cast a spell — but my Combat Telekinesis sent him flying through the air. The Mechanoid surgeons scattered in all directions like cockroaches when you turn the kitchen light on at night.

Darkie ignored them. He strode toward Amphet, sensing him as the only threat to himself. He took a swing...

“No!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

No one heard me.

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Chapter 25

AS WE ALL WELL KNOW, history has a tendency to repeat itself. The difference is, it tends to come back as either a farce or a tragedy. What was happening to me now gave me such a strong sentiment of déjà vu that I could almost second-guess Darkie's next move.

Still, this was very different from his earlier fight back in the canyon — because now my friends were here.

When Darkie was almost upon Amphet, the room filled with incredible heat. My evil twin dodged sharply, evading a fireball that was heading right for him. I very nearly broke into applause when it dawned on me that Arts apparently had no sympathy for my treacherous physical body.

"Serge, we know it's not you, man," Traug kept saying as he donned his armor and began to close in on Darkie. "Just keep fighting. Know what I mean? Try to get outta there."

I cussed. Darkie guffawed, wafting the Gramr with his hand. Talk about an exercise in futility. And no, I wasn't in a defeatist mood. I was trying hard to get back to the controls. As if! It felt like someone had locked me up in a padded room. You could, of course, try to ram the walls with your head in the vain belief that you were a super monster with an adamantium skull. Only I doubted very much it might help.

Traug, too, proved much smarter than we used to give him credit for. As soon as Darkie headed toward him, my Korl friend activated his special ability, directing waves of greenish fog toward "me".

Interestingly enough, while Arts and Traug tried to come up with ways to disable Darkie, Litius shrank into the wall, moving inconspicuously

toward the exit. Can’t say I blamed him. As the smartest individual in the room, he’d taken the most rational decision, quietly following in the surgeons’ wake, simply because he had no chances against “me”. I just hoped that Darkie had spent too much time inside and hadn’t yet gotten the chance to realize that many of my Divine Avatar abilities were already active again.

Still, you had to give him his due. As soon as Darkie noticed the incoming danger, he promptly cast a very costly spell I’d received only recently: Whirlwind. It swept up all the debris in this and adjacent rooms — which was quite a lot — and raised it into the air, together with all the fine brick dust. The only place free from the spell was the inside of the spherical surgery.

Litius stopped in his tracks, gripping at his eyes. Amphet coughed in his corner. Traug sneezed, desperately trying to disable his shield. Arts alone crouched in an awkward position and pulled out her album. An item materialized in her hand — a cloth? I couldn’t really see it because just then, Darkie turned his attention to Traug as the most dangerous opponent in the room.

He approached Traug in a few sweeping strides and took a swing with my sword.

Then I breathed a sigh of relief. Despite his constant drinking, bad visibility and his reputation for not being the sharpest knife in the drawer, Traug had never stopped being an excellent warrior. No idea whether he sensed the approaching blow or just heard it, but he parried it with the most natural ease.

Now I was scared like I’d never been before. What I dreaded most was that Darkie might simply rewind time and battle through Traug’s defenses the second or third time round. Which would be the end of it. The Gramr knew no mercy.

Still, either Darkie was too caught up in the heat of the fight or he simply decided to go easy on time rewinds, but he apparently decided not to waste them on Traug. Especially because now he also had a new trump card up his sleeve.

Traug missed Darkie's left hook — either because he must have thought his armor strong enough or because he was just too slow, I don't know. Which was a mistake. Because Darkie's left arm wasn't a regular human limb of flesh and blood anymore, but a bionic implant made of some damn good alloy. Why damn good, might you ask? Well, it just had to be, to leave such an impressive dent in Traug's helmet.

Traug appeared to be stunned if not downright knocked out. The problem was, Darkie had no intention of stopping there. He showered my Korl friend with a barrage of well-aimed blows.

Still, when I already thought that Traug was destined for a knockout complete with brain hemorrhage, something strange happened. And if I, of all people, hadn't seen it coming, you can imagine Darkie's surprise.

Arts shot up from her crouched position like a furious cat. Covering herself with that piece of cloth she'd pulled out of her album, she went for "me". No sword, no staff, she attacked me with her bare hands. Or should I say, she flung her arms around my neck and... she kissed me.

Something snapped inside of "me". Pulled by momentum, Darkie took a couple more steps toward her, not yet realizing the enormity of his fiasco. It took him the whole of two seconds to remember he could rewind time — but I didn't let him do so as I began to regain control of my body.

I clung to my time rewinds as hard as I could while Arts didn't release her grip on him, either. Darkie wriggled, trying to push the desperate girl off himself, but his brand-new mechanoid arm wasn't as strong anymore. The Gramr had already disappeared inside my inventory. Now I could clearly hear the panicking thoughts rushing through Darkie's mind.

My foot stepped inside the sphere. Once again I felt the full weight of my body. Actually, not just mine but also Arts's, who was still clinging to me like a fungus to a tree trunk. Admittedly, it felt much nicer: her soft lips, her hot tongue exploring my mouth, the vertiginous smell of her body; her breasts so near... I might have actually lingered for a few more minutes, succumbing to her irresistible magic.

"Enough, enough!" I finally managed. "That's me! It's really me now!"

She peered suspiciously into my eyes, then reluctantly let go of me as she must have believed me.

Immediately a crashing force pinned me down from inside. It felt like an attempt to break down a flimsy door barely held closed by a loose latch. That was Darkie coming round.

"Amphet! Amphet!" I collapsed to my knees, clutching my head.

As if that might help! I felt like a tiny army unit assaulted by enemy hordes. One minute more, and they'd sweep me away, leaving but a bloodied shadow on the ground to remember me by.

When I was ready to give up and throw in the towel, succumbing to Darkie's control, two quivering hands lay on my head.

Immediately I felt better. With every second, the inner pressure grew increasingly weaker until I realized I was the one in control once again.

"Your alter ego seems to adapt itself to its trance," Amphet explained. "It gets used to the effects of my influence which affects it less and less with every passing day."

Oh great. Tell me something I don't know. Still, I knew better than to say it out loud. No point upsetting the kid.

Still, Amphet added as he rearranged his cracked mask,

“I must report what just happened to my superiors.”

“Sure,” I managed with a forced cool.

Casting glances at Orael prostrated on the floor, Amphet slipped out of the room. I listened intently for the sound of his footsteps to stop clattering down the staircase. Only then did I walk over to Orael and patted his cheeks.

Gradually he came round. “What happened? Why did you attack me?”

“Post-surgery stress, I suppose. I felt disoriented. It’s all right now. Your mechanoids just legged it. They must be halfway to the Gatehouse right now.”

“I’ll take care of them,” Orael said, climbing back to his feet. “And I’ll just pretend this never happened. We’ll tell Letraine that the surgery went smoothly.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed. “There’s another thing I’d like to know. Now that I have this prosthetic installed, when can we go and get Farhall?”

Orael shrugged. “Everything’s been arranged. All you need to do is go there and retrieve the stone. Easy. So answering your question, it’s as soon as you’re ready...”

“I am,” I hurried to say, wary of any stirrings within me.

The longer we dragged this out, the more powerful Darkie would grow. In the end, I just wouldn’t be strong enough to restrain him. The easiest solution would be to get rid of the Avatars and start restoring my karma. Still, it didn’t seem so simple at all to me. I had a funny feeling that Orael’s “Easy!” concealed a whole minefield of problems, enough to sink a

whole fleet, let alone my tiny ship. Surely Orael didn't think that I believed their altruistic intentions? Even though Letraine and his gang were bound by the Oath, I had every reason to expect surprises.

"In which case," Orael paused, thinking, "we could do it tonight. Which is," he glanced at his interface, "in five hours' time. Are you sure you need to be in such a hurry?"

"I'm sure I'm sure."

"Well, in that case," Orael produced a piece of parchment and offered it to me, "this is your RV. This is where our guy will wait for you. He's gonna tell you he represents an alternative travel agency that specializes in guided tours for mechanoids. Your reply should be: 'Excellent, I need to climb all the way to the top.' Think you can remember that?"

"Oh yes."

"Naturally, you'll have to go on your own."

"Excuse me," Arts perked up. "What about us?"

"I don't think I can see any more prosthetic implants in this room," Orael said through clenched teeth. "Without one, no one can get as far as the Ninth Order."

"I think he's right," I said, motioning Arts to stop. "You'll just wait for me in the Tenth Order. It's okay."

I could see in her face that it wasn't okay. It took Arts all of her self-control to defeat her inner demons — but finally, she stepped aside.

"In that case, see you there," I told Orael.

"I don't think we'll meet again," he replied. "Everything's been arranged. All accounts have been settled and all Oaths have been sworn.

Once you retrieve Farhall, we'll frame the Manager of the Fifth Order for stealing it. And please, don't touch anything here," he said, pointing at the portable surgery. "My assistants will take care of it all."

I nodded, staring in disgust at my very own severed arm splattered with blood. I clenched my left fist. Metal creaked its protest.

I shuddered. In fact, the implant seemed to obey me just fine, even though I wasn't sure I could feel it properly. It felt like my own arm, only fallen asleep. As if blood was about to resume its flow any moment, bringing everything back to normal.

I tore my gaze away from it all — my severed arm, the surgical tools — and walked over to check on the unconscious Traug.

He was in a bad way. The nose guard of his combat helmet was badly damaged, completely caved in under my mechanized punch. I wanted to straighten it out, seeing as I had all the right tools at hand — or rather, as my hand had turned into a perfect multi tool. Still, I knew better than to mess with him.

"Let me do it," Arts said, laying her hands onto Traug's admittedly roughed-up face.

A brief flash of light didn't make him any prettier, but at least he started showing signs of life. Better than nothing, I suppose.

"What gave you that idea?" I asked Arts, trying to look at Traug and not at her.

"Your Darkie is a bit like Hulk in that respect. The more you hit him, the stronger he becomes while you can only get weaker. Why, did you like it?"

"I didn't feel a thing," I lied. "I felt being pushed back into my body, that's all."

It was Traug who saved me from Arts' sarcastic retort. He winced and opened his eyes. After a moment's deliberation, he put his deformed helmet away into his inventory.

"Your n-n-nose is br-br-broken," Litius stated the obvious, walking over to us.

"That's nothing," Arts said. "I thought that Serge — I mean the other Serge — would bludgeon you to death."

"Get away with you," Traug cracked a smile which made his nose look even more crooked. "It's not the first time my nose got whacked and it definitely won't be the last."

"Listen, man, I'm sorry."

Traug waved my apology away. As in, *'can happen to anyone'*. Yeah right. I'd smashed his face into pulp and broken his nose for him — but he took it in his stride as if it was the most natural thing in his world.

But me, I felt utterly ashamed of myself. Which was probably a good thing. Feeling ashamed means your heart isn't entirely callous quite yet.

"Arts, do you think you could take Traug to the doctor? Do we even have a doctor in the Community?"

"We do," Arts and Litius replied in unison.

"And I'll just pop into Mechilos and be right back."

Arts perked up. "You aren't going on your own, surely?"

"You can't get any further than the Tenth Order, anyway," I said.

“We will if we have to,” Traug protested. “We’ll turn the place to scrap if it helps you.”

“Let me explain,” Litius said calmly. “What we’re witnessing is a case of Ratio clashing with Emotio. Logically thinking, there’s nothing we can do to help Serge because we won’t be able to go as far as even the Ninth Order. That’s when Emotio kicks in. All of us here would love nothing better than to help and support you. This could actually lift your spirits and improve your morale. I noticed already a long time ago that human beings...”

“Oh please,” Arts cut him short. “Stop your nonsense before we all start crying. And you,” she switched her gaze to me, “we’re coming with you. We’ll just wait by the city gates if necessary. Just to cover your retreat.”

“You’re too much, you,” I said wearily. “Very well, then. See you by the Gatehouse in four hours’ time.”

“Come on, lazy,” Arts poked the prostrated Traug with her boot. “It’s your nose that’s broken, not your legs. If you promise to be a good boy, I might buy you a beer.”

I picked up my clothes and slid out of the room, missing the hearty slap on Traug’s crooked face when he’d leaned his weight against Arts a bit too frivolously for an invalid. I pulled on my sweater and donned my trench coat.

In doing so, I also felt the seam between my implant and my body. It felt weird. It might take some getting used to. Besides, my new arm turned out to be a bit heavier than my right one. I realized that as I caught my reflection in a tinted shop window by the market. My shoulders looked really lopsided. This was another thing I might have to get used to. Of course, nothing had prevented Orael from ordering some sort of weight pads or additional pins for my other side, but that would have cost money too.

I still couldn’t work out what on earth had made Orael so eager to accommodate me. It was him who’d offered the solution to our problem; it was also him who’d made all the necessary arrangements for the surgery; it was he who’d found the surgeons and... oh no, I could smell a big stinky rat there somewhere.

As I traveled back home, I struggled to get used to the foreign object which was my new arm now. It required a lot of supervision. I absent-mindedly crumpled a handrail on the bus as if it were made of cardboard. It was a good job it wasn’t my right arm they’d replaced, otherwise it might have taken me a few handshakes to discover my new bone-crushing power.

Predictably, Bumpkin wasn’t amused. He behaved like a parent discovering his rebellious child’s first tattoo.

“Holy Father of God! Are you completely nuts? Once a bonehead, always a bonehead. What else have you had replaced?”

“Isn’t my arm enough already?” I asked, pulling off my boots with my left hand to work it a little.

“Having even your little toe replaced is a sin against God! That’s not what He created you for!”

“Oh please,” I said, finally removing the boot and flinging it aside. “You’re not going to start about all that salvation bullshit, are you? You aren’t going to do the rounds with a collection plate? I don’t believe in gods, whoever they are.”

“I’m not talking about gods. I’m talking about our Creator. Don’t screw your face like that! I might not be the most educated goblin in the world, but I remember what my parents told me! Everything around us, everything that we see was created by the three brothers. They weren’t actually brothers, but they were creatures from the loftiest of all existing worlds, the world so great that there’ll never be one like that anymore. One

of the three brothers created the Pan-Universe where we all live now. The second one built the Hidden Vale alongside his brother's world — he made all the Seekers, you and myself too. You see now?"

I realized I was standing open-mouthed, listening to his story. "What about the third one?"

"You can't even mention him. That's what my mother always said. She said it brings bad luck. So I didn't."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier?"

He shrugged. "Why should I? It's pretty obvious, anyway. Are you hungry, troublemaker?"

"I am," I said, trying to take it all in.

Naturally, I'd always been curious about the origins of life in the Universe. Before my initiation as a Player, the truth had seemed plain and reasonable enough: the world just came on with a Big Bang. But now I had too many questions that needed answers. How had Players come about? Why? What role did they play? Predictably, no one could tell me — until now, purely incidentally, my very own house goblin had shared his own version of creation, one that had been handed down to him as a beautiful parable. Although I had no idea which parts of it were actually true, at least it gave me some food for thought.

Thus pondering, I dined on some veal kidneys (I couldn't for the life of me remember ever buying them) with onions and mash while Bumpkin walked around me, studying my brand-new limb.

"You could bash a nail in the wall with that," he finally decreed.

"Or you could bash a house goblin's chatty head in," I said. "Mind making the bed for me, mister?"

“Why? It’s daytime!”

“I might have a busy night, that’s why. So please just do it. I’ll grab a few Zs while I can.”

I finished my dinner and slumped onto the bed fully dressed, setting the alarm clock in my phone. Normally, whenever you need to grab a few extra hours of sleep during daytime — like before a New Year’s party — it never works as it should. You just keep tossing and turning, crumpling the sheets and twisting your pillow, turning it over to press your face to the cold side. But this time, it had all come together. For the first time in a long while, I was calm and at peace with myself. No anxiety, no agonizing misgivings. Even though thoughts were flashing through my head at the speed of light, all they did was usher in the approaching slumber.

I woke up easily, as if awoken by the first insistent ray of sunshine after a full night’s sleep. Okay, not exactly a sunray but rather a late-night streetlight, too dull to assault my eyes. I switched off the alarm, walked into the bathroom, washed my face and started dressing.

“You really think it’s gonna work?” the voice asked sarcastically.

He didn’t surprise me much. The effects of Amphet’s trance seemed to get weaker with every passing day. I even felt like entering into a conversation. “Yes, I think so.”

“Just let me warn you you don’t have much time. I’m fed up with babysitting you. As soon as I—”

“I know. You’re gonna drive me into a corner and never let me out. Don’t worry. You play a considerable role in my plans.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, you’ll have to wait to find out, won’t you?”

I donned the trench coat and left, not bothering to say good-bye to Bumpkin.

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Chapter 26

WE ALL KNOW THAT all development breeds further development, resulting in eventual progress. In other words, those who invest themselves in their own improvement, tend to actively gravitate to further growth. Who was I only a month ago? Just a regular guy with no goals in life worth mentioning; one of the many forgettable millions of the same.

But now that I was a Player, my ambitions grew with every new snippet of the secret knowledge their world seemed to harbor. To the point where I was now considering stealing a major artifact from the Highest Order of Mechilos! And I'd even had my own arm chopped off for the sake of it! The mind boggles.

I closed my bionic fingers around a lump of ice that had dropped from the roof, squeezing it tight. The ice crumbled. My arm was obeying me much better already, even though I still got the impression that it reacted to my brain's signals much slower than it was supposed to. I could only hope I won't have to use it in combat any time soon.

The thought triggered an unpleasant gnawing feeling in my chest. Could be my gut feeling, could be Intuition. Probably, both.

My gang was already awaiting me by the entrance to the Gatehouse, all present and correct. Even Traug looked relatively decent if you disregarded his puffy nose and the black circles around his eyes. The others must have done their best to sober him up.

Arts was a bit jittery, shifting from one foot to the other — either with cold or impatience. Litius seemed a bit on edge too. Did he have the same gut feeling?

“Serge,” a familiar voice called me.

I felt obliged to turn to the sound.

It was Lightning Rod, Amphet and some other Guard — who must have been following me. I really didn’t like their interest in my movements. So I just kept walking without slowing down until I reached my friends and only then turned round to face them.

“You’d better come with us,” Lightning Rod said. “Amphet told us what happened to you. We have reasons to believe that you might present a danger to those around you.”

“So what are you gonna do?” I snapped. “You gonna lock me up in that cellar of yours? Or send me to Sochi to enjoy its climate? I don’t think so.”

“We insist,” the usually calm voice of the Guards’ commander was now as frigid as the expanse of the Arctic.

“I’m afraid I can’t comply,” I said, taking two steps back into the safety of the Gatehouse where I was under the Gatekeeper’s protection.

“We’ll be obliged to take measures against it.”

“Be my guest,” I said, turning my back to them to make it clear the conversation was over.

“Serge, I think they were serious,” Arts said anxiously. “They meant it.”

“I know. They’re not good at being funny. Even the Seers are a bunch of laughs in comparison. So are we just gonna shoot the breeze or are we gonna go?”

Unhesitantly Traug tagged on after me. The others followed suit. The bowl accepted our dust, porting us to Purgator. Which didn't appear so dangerous anymore. Just a transfer.

A brief breather before inhaling the sweltering air of the gloomy Mechilos. According to Iorolf, the best time to do the job was in the evening — but how were you supposed to tell evening from daytime in this constantly dark place?

I checked the map and suppressed a smile. The Order of Trashmen had a complex network that entangled all the four gates into the city in its sticky cobweb — including the one where I was supposed to meet my "city guide". In my opinion, the mechanoids were playing a very dangerous game allowing the Trashmen to have complete control over the city. True, that way the mechanoids had access to cheap materials — but it also made the outlaws of the Tenth Order a power to be reckoned with.

Was it even worth it? Probably. But sooner or later, it was obliged to explode, just like our first-world countries were now reaping the fruit of their colonial past by accepting the constant flow of third-world migrants. Then again, what's that got to do with me? These were none of my problems.

"Come on, let's go," I told the others.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Arts protested. "You have any idea where you're going?"

I smiled without telling her that I had the entire map of the Tenth Order courtesy of the Order of Trashmen.

Not that any of my friends wanted to know. Arts walked next to me; Traug puffed and panted behind, while poor Litius staggered in the rear, making it clear he was exhausted and needed some sleep. Of course. Cats hate heat, don't they? They love nothing better on a hot summer day than to

find a nice cool place for their naps, only venturing out in the chill of the night. Never mind. Might do him some good. No pain, no gain.

“Where are we going?” Arts finally asked me.

“She’s getting a bit too curious just lately, don’t you think?” Darkie’s voice chuckled inside me.

“To the nearest bar,” I said, struggling to ignore him. “It’s just next to the city gate. Incidentally, it’s my new friends who own it.”

“Who do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

Calling it a bar was an exaggeration. More like a huge long shed. But it was indeed located just opposite the giant city gates, impossibly high, their broad sliding halves only open halfway — but even so the gap was wide enough to easily let through a Caterpillar truck.

“God almighty, just look at this monstrosity,” Traug said.

“It can’t be the first time you see the Gates of Mechilos, surely?” Arts asked, herself unable to take her eyes off the entrance to the city.

“Why not? What am I supposed to do here? You can’t get inside, anyway. And I have no desire to roam their refuse sites. I’ve been here once, taken a quick look, had a walk around the suburbs and schlepped off home. What’s here to like? It’s hot and dark, that’s the extent of it.”

“Mechilos is technologically quite advanced,” Litius offered his two cents. “It’s still a far cry from the Central Worlds but I wouldn’t mind taking a walk down its streets.”

We must have looked like a group of foreign tourists eyeing one of the wonders of the world, all three of us dead in our tracks in the middle of

the road with our heads tilted upward, staring hard at the gate with our eyes open wide. After our long hike in pitch blackness, dissolved only occasionally by a lone streetlight at some intersection or other, the illumination of the gate was impressive, allowing us to take in the Mechanoids' mastery in building the wall. Here you could finally see why they needed so much metal and what they spent it on.

How long had it taken them to build this city? And what were the Central Worlds like if this place was still a far cry from them?

"Okay, quit staring," I finally said. "You stay here."

"But Serge!"

"This bar is the nearest to the gate. Just sit there and keep an eye on it. I might need a cover when I finally get out."

Not waiting for them to protest, I stepped toward the shed.

Inside, the place looked even sadder than from the outside. I got the impression that it was built by children with what old bits of planks they could find. The place was a lopsided mishmash of dirty wood board, the floor covered with the same disgusting mixture of dirt and local dust.

Much to my surprise, it was quite busy. Only a few of the customers were mechanoids though. Most of the patrons were refugees hoping one day to get proper citizenship. Judging by the unusual greenish glow emitted by their name tags, the majority of them were members of the Order of Trashmen.

Our arrival at this peculiar watering hole didn't go unnoticed. Correction: *my* arrival.

"Greetings, Sir!" the fat Purg bartender had all but jumped as he saw me. He scurried out from behind the bar and hurried toward me, his impressive belly jiggling at each step. His handshake was more like the

clutches of someone struck by an epileptic fit. In other words, he was completely smitten.

“What an honor for our humble establishment! What would you like? Light cocktail refreshments? Or maybe some local ale, so strong that it pulls rivets out of mechanoids’ joints? Whatever it is, it’s on the house!”

The few mechanoids didn’t seem offended by the owner’s jib — on the contrary, they looked as pleased as the three little pigs who’d chased the wolf away. Same applied to everyone present, really. It was as if they thought I was some sort of guest of honor, someone they were supposed to love and cater to his every whim.

“I hope you don’t mind if my friends stay here for a while?” I asked. “We need a table by the window with a good view of the city gates.”

Strangely, I didn’t feel at all embarrassed, as if I were some spoilt millionaire brat who’d spent his entire life throwing money around and partying with fellow VIPs. I didn’t even have to reach for the dust — my title with the Order did the trick perfectly well. Not only did they find us just the right table, but the guys who sat there hurried to make themselves scarce with a subservient air, as if surrendering their seats to us was a great honor for them.

Arts sat next to the murky window, scrutinized the view, then nodded her satisfaction. “Will do.”

“Just stay here,” I said, “and keep your heads down. I’ll be back as soon as I’m finished. Promise?”

“Yeah,” Arts and Litius replied in unison. As for Traug, he was already casting longing looks at the bartender. Just as I was closing the door behind me, leaving this excuse for a drinking hole, I heard his thunderous voice,

“Hey mister, what was that you were saying about your local ale?”

Yeah yeah. He was incorrigible. But this way at least I'd know where to look for him — provided they didn't run out of alcohol. Hopefully, the Order had plenty of stocks to quench his thirst.

Breathless with awe, I walked through the gates, trying not to stare at the local guards. Or were they customs officers? They looked the part: one of them an Archalus fitted with dainty metallic wings, a couple of Purgs with a few prosthetic limbs between them, a big orc with a steely cuirass in place of his belly (how had he ended up here at all?), three humans and a tiny little Zverg. They were quite busy steering the incoming flow toward a scanner gate similar to those we have in airports. All the visitors as well as the townsfolk on their way back in had to pass through it; they would pause, then continue on their way. Those leaving the city weren't submitted to this procedure.

I cleared the entrance without a glitch, then continued along the wall for a short while until I stopped to check the map. This seemed to be the right place — but where was the guide they'd promised me? I hated waiting at the best of times; but waiting in a strange place, in an alien world with an illegal device stuck in my prosthetic arm right next to a checkpoint brimming with guards — all this had really set my nerves on edge. Don't get me wrong: I could always fight my way out if the guards smelled the rat — but in that case, I could forget ever laying my hands on Farhall, that's for sure.

Which explains why, by the time I heard a quiet rustle right next to me, I was so wound up that my piss was boiling.

I acted on instinct. My brand-new bionic arm shot up, grabbing the intruder by the throat and lifting him above the ground. I shouldn't have been so critical of it: in an emergency, its neural connections seemed to obey my brain signals on the double.

"I..." the creature wheezed, "I rprsnt... an altrntv agncee..."

“Pardon?” I asked, slightly easing my grip.

“I represent an alternative travel agency... we specialize in guided tours for mechanoids...”

I stuck out my other arm, casting Light.

The creature was human — or should I say, must have been human in some past life. By now, the only human parts left in this tin can were his head and upper torso. He was dressed for the weather in a flimsy tank top and a pair of shorts. No shoes, because his mechanical feet didn’t need any.

“Excellent,” I said, setting him down. “I need to climb all the way to the top.”

“Nice to meet you, Serge. My name is Sergo.”

“What, are you also Sergei? Did you too run out of options coming up with a nickname?”

“Yeah,” the mechanoid admitted. “By the time I realized the sheer magnitude of my stupidity it was already too late. I sort of forgot that Sergei was the most popular name in Russia. So don’t be surprised if you run into more Serges, Seregees, Seroges and other fruit of the Players’ admittedly limited imagination. Never mind. Take this,” he said, handing me a hefty stack of papers and a triangular plastic card.

“This is your ID and everything that comes with it,” he said. From now on, you’re Serge I-34, citizen of the Ninth Order with visitation rights to the Highest Order. According to these papers, you’ve had all of your limbs replaced, as well as your torso and part of your vital organs. But that will only work for scanners and visual inspections.”

“So am I supposed to present all this every time I enter a new level?”

“Oh no, this is just in case. I hope you won’t have to. Our goal is simple. We need to get to the Highest level, wait for the right moment and get hold of the stone. I don’t think it’s gonna present a problem. We have everything covered. Next, this,” he pointed to the triangular card in my hand, “this is a key. It’s also just for any emergencies which I hope won’t happen. You need to press it to the scanner if your own mini key card malfunctions for some reason.”

“Where’s that, then?”

“It’s in your implant here,” he touched my wrist. “Having said that, if it does malfunction, the big triangular key won’t save you, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Because that would mean that the projection device has stopped working too. But let’s be positive,” said the tin can named Sergo with an encouraging smile.

“Okay. So what’s the plan?”

“Well, if you’re done fulfilling your strangulation fantasies, we need to pop in to another place first to pimp your makeup a bit. That’ll give me a chance to tell you everything.”

So much for first impressions. When I’d first seen this mechanically challenged dude, I’d really felt like exterminating him a little. But now that I’d taken a better look, he seemed to be okay. Not a bad dude at all, cheerful and no-nonsense. We might make a good team, after all.

I followed after him. Despite all his mechanoid prowess, Sergo was still a human of rather average height, not a patch on a half-blood Korl like myself. So he scurried in front while I followed him rather unhurriedly.

“When the Axis completes its last cycle for the day, the Fair-Eyed Cartos retires to his private chambers. He walks through the Hall of the

Center of the World, descends the Stairs of Eternity, then crosses the Corridor of Gear Wheels. Which is where we could try to take Farhall from him."

"Why there?"

"Because there're no guards posted in the Corridor of Gear Wheels. So we could either wrestle Cartos' staff from his hands — because Farhall is mounted on it, topping it — or..."

"Or kill Cartos."

"To tell you the truth, that would be a much better development. It would make it so much easier to cover up our tracks."

I was about to say that I hadn't gotten into it to become a hired assassin but bit my tongue just in time. You just couldn't tell how it was all gonna pan out. Naturally, I was all for the principles of peace and humanity, but if this Cartos guy dug his heels in, he might leave me with no other option.

Darkie seemed to be all for that, too. *"The ruler of all Mechanoids,"* his voice said pensively within me. *"A top dog — or should I say a top ass? I'd love to know how many Divine Avatars he's stashed over the years."*

"We need to hurry though," Sergo continued. "It's only a couple of hours left till the Axis begins its last cycle for the day. Not even. And we still need to get to the Highest Order.... aha, here we are!"

The hut that sat at the end of the trail looked more like a smithy hit by a bomb. The ground was littered with bits of steel, springs, rivets and gear wheels. Stepping cautiously over them, Sergo reached the door and gave a secret code knock.

The hinges creaked. A strip of light fell to the ground. The unshaven mug of a tiny Zverg showed in the door.

“Ah, it’s you,” the Zverg said.

“I told you I’d come, didn’t I? I have a client for you.”

“Come in,” the Zverg said, opening the door wider. “What does he want?”

To compare the inside of the hut to a shed would be complimenting it. The Zverg was definitely a hoarder, and a messy one at that. Apparently, his Mom and Dad had never showed him how to clean. I shuddered as I realized that all the items strewn on the ground outside must have simply not fitted inside.

“Take your clothes off,” the little Zverg told me.

“I’m not removing my trench coat.”

The Zverg looked quizzically at Sergo who shrugged as if saying, *‘you see who I have to work with!’* Then my namesake produced yet another sheet of paper — a blueprint this time, which most likely was a blueprint of myself — and handed it to the Zverg.

The little guy heaved a sigh, then dove into the heaped-up mechanical junk, rummaging through it. When he reemerged, he had some sort of a steel collar in his hands. He tried it on me, cussed and started looking for a bigger one.

And it went on and on and on...

After about ten minutes, I was the perfect picture of a Highest Order mechanoid dweller. My other arm was covered up with steel plates; the steel collar sat snug on my neck; even half of my head had been covered with armor plates which made my skull appear as solid steel in the hut’s filthy mirror. Plus an infrared eye — Terminator, eat your heart out.

Finally, the Zverg crossed his arms on his chest with the air of an accomplished artist. Sergo picked up the blueprint and put it away.

“Good work,” he said, pouring some dust into the little guy’s hands, then turned to me with a look of satisfaction. “Now we’re all set to go.”

So off we went.

At first, we walked in circles along overgrown trails until finally we came to the main road — the one that led to the city. To say I was on edge would be an understatement. Besides, the wretched steel skull was so heavy I soon got a terrible pain in my neck. What a bastard!

Sergo must have sensed my state because he said softly just as we approached the gate,

“Above all, don’t look like you’re anxious or something. You are the citizen of the Ninth Order. Part of the local elite. For you, this is just a formality,” he promptly shut up because we were approaching the customs officers.

By now, the crowd had dissipated into four waiting lines, by the number of the scanner gates. I watched every movement of the mechanoids waiting their turn in front of me.

A Kabirid with a bionic forearm pressed his wrist to one of the indentations in the gate. The scanner beeped softly. The customs officer paused, staring at the screen, then nodded. The Kabirid was free to go.

A Purg guy with some complex mechanical inlays in his leg pressed his shin to a lower indentation in the gate. Another short beep, followed by the officer’s intense look at the screen, then the guy was flagged through.

Finally, it was my turn. I did my very best trying to look as if I’d been doing this every day before breakfast. The fact that I was dripping with sweat was due to the oppressive heat, of course, and not the fact that I was

shaking with nerves. The thick scanner gate in front of me was overwhelming; the officer's glare promised nothing good. I got the impression he was about to spread his steely wings and thunder "Illegal alien!" at me, which would leave me with no other option but to fight my way out.

That's when I thanked heavens for my bionic arm. I may have been shaking like a leaf but it remained firm and steady. My wrist touched the gate; I heard the soft beep.

I looked up at the officer. The next few seconds felt like an eternity. Was it time for me to draw the Gramr? One more second... and then another...

"You can pass," the Archalus officer said, nodding me through.

I stepped forward on rubbery legs. Sergo had already gone through and was waiting nearby.

Still, for some reason the heavy premonition hadn't released my heart. I turned round. The Archalus was having a whispered conversation with the Purg guard. Just as I was about to quicken my pace, the Purg locked his gaze with mine and raised a commanding hand.

"Mister Quiric! Mister Quiric! May I have a moment of your time, please?"

I turned to look at Sergo. His face was ashen with dread.

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Chapter 27

A LOT HAS BEEN SAID about the importance of preserving one's cool in some cultures — like the Japanese, for instance, — where people can go to extreme lengths to save face. Admittedly, Russians have something similar too — with a slight difference which can be best described by the old adage of keeping up appearances.

Which was exactly what I was trying to do right now, putting on a brave face for a shit situation while desperately sifting through my available spells. My right arm was readying itself for a grip on my imba sword, choosing primary targets. Darkie, too, was conspicuous by his absence as if he was up to something.

"What right do you have to intercept us?" Sergo's voice demanded behind my back.

"We're not intercepting anyone," the officer said, looking slightly embarrassed. "But you two are Quirics, aren't you?"

"We are indeed," Sergo said, catching up with me and inconspicuously brushing my hand with his as if saying, *don't do anything stupid*.

"You're not going to the upper Orders, by any chance?"

"Who do you think you are to ask these kinds of questions?" Sergo demanded, becoming increasingly comfortable in his role of a posh dude with nuts and bolts for brains. If I didn't stop him now, he might start shouting that his uncle was the Public Prosecutor, threatening the customs guys with all sorts of procedural innuendo.

So I decided to grab the initiative. It didn’t look as if they were after me. All I needed was to find out what this orange-cheeked individual really wanted from us.

“So what do you want?” I asked, trying to warm up to my role of an important Mechanoid.

“My brother works the gate of the Fifth Order today. He left his lunch behind this morning. Maybe if you could be so kind as...”

Sergo cringed. “Are you suggesting you can use a Quiric as your personal delivery boy?”

The Purg officer was a sorry sight. He must have already regretted being so forward ten times over.

“Give it here,” I said benignly.

I slid the small lunch bag into my inventory while listening to the Purg’s apologies and declarations of gratitude. When I finally left the checkpoint, I felt like I’d lost five pounds.

Sergo, too, appeared to be relieved. “I thought they’d had us,” he admitted.

“Who the hell are Quirics?”

“That’s what they call those who live in the top Orders. The more body replacements you have, the more they respect you here.”

I chuckled as I took in the view of the Ninth Order lying before me. “Order” being the operative word. Broad avenues, straight as arrows, met at a giant square topped with an impressive staircase which led upward to the summit of this pyramid city.

As for the streets themselves, this place was considerably cleaner than its outskirts. At least that wretched dust was nowhere to be seen. The avenues were lined with identical buildings, all of the same height, with identical doors and windows. The only way to tell them apart was by the glowing shop signs highlighted by some kind of crystals — or maybe just LED lights.

I checked the map. Everything was correct. According to the intel I'd got from Luber, there were plenty of buildings like these here. I tried to count the approximate number of them at least in this quarter of the city, but quickly lost count.

"Let's get to the staircase," Sergo said, apparently not too appreciative of my interest in local life.

As if in a dream, I followed him, trying not to bump into any of the Order's denizens bustling about. Most of them were regular creatures, their bionic implants quite inconspicuous. I barely managed to duck out of a dude's way who only had half his hand implanted, his thumb still perfectly fleshy. He must have done the minimal surgery he could, simply for the sake of local citizenship. Then again, who could tell?

The "staircase" in question was more like a multi-lane highway reaching for the skies. The semblance was increased by some kind of automatic elevator platforms in its right section. They seemed to move considerably faster than we did. So after the first hundred steps, when my feet began to remind me of themselves, I motioned Sergo toward them.

He shook his head. "They're only for the incapacitated. It would be good, but it's too much hassle. We'd have to change all your documents all over again. Besides, it would serve no purpose."

"Why not?" I asked just as my knee began to hurt.

"The incapacitated can't live beyond the Fourth Order where they have all their bad joints replaced. So there're no elevators to the Orders

higher than that.”

Okay. Basically, shut up and keep climbing. Which I did. There wasn’t much to look at here, anyway, apart from the dim blue lights marking the center and the edges of the stairs. Not my idea of a guided tour. I definitely hadn’t counted on blood blisters as part of the agenda.

By the time we got to a huge landing in front of another set of gates, my clothes were dripping with sweat. The combination of intense heat and strenuous exercise was beginning to get to me.

“No pushing, please,” the customs officers pleaded wearily with the crowd.

I turned back, peering into the darkness. The Ninth Order’s lights were glowing below, stunning in their geometric precision. I could barely make out its outskirts which, in combination with refuse sites, appeared no more than blotches of color, badly lit by whatever had come in handy.

I was about to turn back toward the humming crowd when I heard a creaking so loud as if the entire city was flexing its mechanical joints. For a brief moment, the lighting became brighter. I covered my eyes with a hand, getting used to it, but soon darkness fell back upon us.

“The Axis has made its penultimate turn for the day,” Sergo said.

“The Axis?”

“Yeah, the Axis,” he shrugged. “The one that feeds Mechilos with energy.”

“Where did it come from?”

“It was built by our Founding Fathers — the greatest engineers who began the building of Mechilos. As the Axis turns, it produces enough energy to last us through the day. At nighttime, it doesn’t stop but goes into

an energy-saving mode, only enough to sustain our vital facilities. Simple, really."

I chuckled. "Totally."

Then I shut up because it was our turn to enter the next Order.

Here, the procedure was the same. Identical, really. Same scanner, same routine — which this time went without a glitch, — same broad avenues. The customs officers were different, true. The streetlamps higher. The buildings more impressive. But once I'd taken a closer look, I realized that the streets were narrower here.

"You coming?" Sergo asked, pointing at the staircase.

"Wait," I said, looking around. "I need a breather."

Here, the flow of those traveling to higher Orders had thinned somewhat, although not much. As far as I understood, the majority of Mechilos' population lived at lower levels — oops, sorry, Orders. From my feet's point of view, it would have been much better had the Manager of the Highest Order had his residence somewhere below. Not only would it have made it easier for us to escape, but we wouldn't have to climb this staircase to heaven, either.

Still, Mechilos managed to surprise me again, repeatedly so. The gate to the Seventh Order met us with a welcome breeze. It took me some time to locate the source of it, peering around me in search for any aircons. Only then did I notice several large flat pipes next to the customs' scanners which seemed to create the air currents. I liked it so much that it took Sergo a lot of effort to convince the hot, sweaty me to move on. He kept blabbing something about special nets that were hung over the levels providing the welcome cool — but I wasn't really listening.

I only started focusing on his words when we were already in view of the Fifth Order. By then, I was so sick of climbing the stairs I couldn't even

cuss.

As if in jest, the Game threw me a bone.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 17.

Very funny, ha ha. Especially considering my left knee cap was by now literally falling apart. Did they have a shop here to have it replaced with a titanium one?

Strangely enough, as soon as we'd reached the Fifth Order, my anger released me. Darkie kept quiet — but I had no doubt he'd been feeding on my grim mood all along.

The entrance to the Fifth Order differed a lot from the lower ones. It had a line of low automatic glass doors which swung open every time the customs officer flagged a visitor through. And not just that: every time they opened, I could sense a whiff of fresh air escaping from within: the "welcome cool" that Sergo had been on about.

I turned to him, pinning him with a meaningful look, making it clear I wanted an explanation of how the top Orders functioned.

"Starting from the Fifth Order, they're all equipped with aircon systems," Sergo explained. "The Orders themselves are insulated from above by a special transparent material that we call a net. It's lit up so that maintenance teams can promptly detect any malfunctions."

Indeed, as soon as I entered the Fifth Order, I too could see the tiny glowing blue specks overhead. It looked like a giant net covering the city, glinting with identical little stars.

Dammit, it was good here! Sergo paused for a few minutes, allowing me to catch my breath, then pulled me by the hand to keep going.

“Wait a sec,” I said, remembering the Purg guard request. “I’ve got that dude’s lunch getting cold.”

To tell you the truth, I wasn’t really bothered. A guard had asked me to deliver his brother’s lunch, so what! I was a Quiric, wasn’t I? A super duper VIP dude. Still, I decided to run the guy’s errand for him, simply to prolong the pleasure of staying in the cool for just a tiny bit longer.

I immediately recognized him. The Fifth-Order guard was a carbon copy of his orange-cheeked brother. I would have been able to pick him out from a whole crowd of Purgs if necessary, simply because the two turned out to be identical twins.

“You seem to have family in the First Order. They asked me to say hi,” I said, handing him the lunch box.

“Oh, thank you so much, Mister Quiric,” he hurried, all but bowing profusely. “Otherwise I would have been obliged to eat in one of them there taverns, and that costs, you know. We’re octuplets, so at the end of the day it all adds up, if you know what I mean, Sir.”

You’ve helped the Defir family.

You’ve received a new title: ***Friend.***

From now on, you’ll be a welcome guest in their house.

“Could I do something for you in return?” the guard insisted.

I chuckled. I didn’t even know the guy’s name, and he definitely saw me for the first and last time in his life. Okay, correction: he’d see me again on my way back — but what favor could he possibly render me if he was so poor he had to bring his own lunch from home?

“I don’t need anything, thanks,” I said. “Your brother asked me to help you, so that’s what I did. It didn’t cost me anything.

The Defir family is amazed at your generosity!

You've received a new title: ***Family Friend.***

You can now count on their help and a bed in their house.

I'll tell you more: I too was amazed at my own generosity. The Game seemed to have somehow mistaken my lack of concern, transforming it into selflessness. It probably knew better — but still I found it funny.

As for the Purg guard, he all but danced a jig around me, eager to please. It took me a lot of effort to finally get rid of him and go back to Sergo who was getting quite jittery.

Finally, the glass doors swung open, letting us through to the staircase leading toward the Fourth Order.

"Sergo, mind if I ask you a question?" I tried to strike up a question just to get my mind off the heat.

"Fire away."

"If mechanoids live in the Eighth Order, how come they work in the Fifth? They can't even get here, can they?"

"We have a concept here known as 'visitation rights'. To give you an example, you as a citizen of the Ninth Order have visitation rights to the Highest Order — only for a few hours, but still."

"Why?"

"Because you're presumed to be working there. Or helping someone who is. The Highest Orders still need maintenance people — cooks, mechanics, street sweepers... By contrast, the Ninth Order itself has very little work and a lot of available mechanoids. We have certain quotas for

our citizens, so they can live in one Order and work in a totally different one."

"Like those twin customs officers?"

"Exactly. The thing you need to keep in mind is that a Ninth-Order citizen will never get a quota to work in the Second or the Third one. But getting a job in the Fifth Order for someone who lives in the Eighth is quite easy. Especially if you have a rare profession — like working in security or something."

I wiped away the sticky sweat without saying anything. In my eyes, Mechilos had by now ceased to be a giant sluggish beast which lived in accordance with a very special set of its own rules. This was just a big city with its rich quarters and suburbs. In some places, you could buy food real cheap; in others, it cost ten times the price. Some worked for peanuts while others knew their worth.

"Take this," Sergo said, offering me a piece of parchment. "This is the map of the Highest Order."

I crumbled it in my hands, then checked my interface. The map was already there. The problem was, it was very approximate, more like a child's laborious drawing.

"Only two of us have ever been there," Sergo added apologetically. "Both were illegals."

"So you're not coming with me, are you?"

"I only have visitation rights for the Second Order. But I'll be waiting for you there. Let's go. We have very little time left."

The higher we climbed, the shorter streets became. If you took a good look, you could already make out the pyramid's summit bathing in light. Here, regular steel was almost unseen, replaced by glass and fancy alloys.

The buildings, too, looked more like mansions of some media celebrities. By the time we'd reached the third Order, the side elevators were indeed gone, just like Sergo had said they would. And once we'd approached the Second Order, he parted ways with me.

"I'll wait for you right here," he said.

The First Order struck me with its splendor. Benches, fountains, gardens, all basking in a luxurious illumination which was meant to imitate twilight on Earth. Only now did I realize it was evening here, thanks to an impressive hologram mimicking a sunset in Cesspit.

The levels below disappeared into the gloom: the brightly lit Second Order, followed by a slightly dimmer Third one below it; the Fourth one barely visible, while the Fifth one only hinted at its presence. Those below them were just a guess, vanishing into the gloom.

That had been quite a hike, by the looks of it. Unsurprisingly, my Athletics had grown 2 pt. And now I was facing the final leg of this marathon.

"I can see that your visitation rights are valid for two hours," the custom guard told me: a watchful and almost entirely mechanized Kabirid. "Still, allow me to remind you that the reception hours of the Fair-Eyed Cartos only last until nighttime, meaning you don't have very much time left."

I very nearly let slip that I might not visit Cartos at all, and spend this time admiring the local sights instead. Still, I bit my tongue just in time. I'd already realized that the only sight worth seeing here was their top manager, period. So I just nodded and set off up the stairs.

Although the heat hadn't subsided, the gusty wind compensated for it somewhat. Besides, this staircase was considerably shorter than the ones before it. I rather energetically trotted to the last glass doors, barely slowing down for the two guards. Highest Order, here I come!

It was basically a park with a temple which towered a good 50 feet above the pyramid world. The perimeter of the buildings below was lined with tall columns, and the buildings themselves were fashioned of some strange yellowish alloy. This was probably where the Manager of the Highest Order took his meals and retired for the night — not at this very moment, but in general.

I checked the map, then headed confidently for the wide open gates of the temple.

The Corridor of Gear Wheels — because that's where I ended up — zigzagged upward, steering clear from the building's center. True to its name, the corridor was filled with the steampunkish sounds of something turning, shunting and whistling. After all the high tech scenes of the outdoor aircon (this place, too, was quite cool), glowing "nets" and almost futuristic buildings, it occurred to me that the surrounding scenery was no more than stage props, a homage to bygone days. And who was I to judge them? I had absolutely no intention of doing so, not least because the Corridor took me to the last one of those wretched staircases which I was supposed to climb.

Its steps were deep and massive, echoing far with my every step. One thing I didn't understand was their name. Why the Stairs of Eternity? What was so eternal about them? They should sack the dreamer they'd hired to come up with these fancy names for them. As for me, my journey was almost over.

I wasn't in a hurry. I had no desire to rush into the Hall of the Center of the World and surprise this Manager dude with a hearty whack on the head. First I needed to make sure he was even there.

Then I saw him.

In a huge round hall with columns he sat, surrounded by six guards, his shiny body reflecting the lights pointed at him.

You’d be hard put to determine which race he’d initially been. Definitely a humanoid. He had no wings, which meant he couldn’t be a Kabirid — nor an Archalus. The rest was mystery.

He was a robot — well, almost. Mechanical arms, mechanical legs and torso, neck and jaw. The only organic bits still left in him were his skull and the top half of his face which I couldn’t see very well from where I was, anyway. Never mind. Let’s imagine that this Cartos used to be human, even though he looked less human at the moment than R2-D2.

But he wasn’t the most interesting thing about this place. At the center of the hall, as if wrenching its way free from the depths of Mechilos, rose an obelisk, its four sides glimmering.

I knew straight away what it was. This was the Axis. The one that fed their whole city with its energy. A mesmerizing sight, as inexplicable for me as magic. I felt like I could spend hours staring at the tiny flares of fire it produced.

This was the time I’d been waiting for.

The floor creaked underfoot. The whole temple rumbled. The Axis made a heavy, laborious turn, marking the end of the day on Mechilos.

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Chapter 28

THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN tacticians and strategists is as old as the world itself. Is it better to weave a complex web of intrigue, second-guessing your opponents' every move and making provision in your plans for each of the many potential variables, only to sit back and watch these intertwining lines come together at the predestined final point? Or should you sweep through your HQ like lightning on steroids, erasing any potential sign of panic and offering revolutionary solutions out of the box?

I didn't fit either description, I'm afraid. Had I been a good strategist, I would have already had Farhall delivered to my home. And you can't really call someone a tactician while they're cowering behind an enormous structure back in the Corridor of Gear Wheels. Because that was the only thing I'd managed to think of: run as far along the corridor as I could, hoping that the two bends I'd put between myself and the hall would somehow mute the sounds of the upcoming scuffle.

So that's where I'd secreted myself, hunkered down behind a large angle pipe.

"Are we gonna have some fun now?" Darkie's voice sneaked into my thoughts.

"In your dreams," I snapped, unable to ignore his presence any longer.

"Famous last words," Darkie quipped, then fell silent.

What a bastard! I was tense like a taut spring as it was, and his snide remarks had done nothing to improve my confidence. As soon as I drew the Gramr to kill or just even wound the Manager, my evil sub-identity would

attempt to snatch control of my body. What was it I'd just said about tacticians and strategists? Should I even mention that I probably knew less about the true meaning of these words than a Lego fireman knew about ballet? I still had no idea how to control him or just how to try to keep him in check. And I didn't even have the "phone a friend" option. Because I could already hear the rattling of steel as the Manager came down the stairs.

A cold chill ran down my spine. My hands erupted in sweat, despite the fact that the entirety of the Highest Order was covered with a "net", making the outside temperature more than comfortable.

I knew I had to act fast. Seeing as Sergo knew the exact time of the Manager's movements, he must have followed the same routine every day. Which meant that the guards posted below at the entrance to the temple were obliged to start wondering whatever might have delayed their Fair-Eyed Wonder.

"Let's just chop his head off, end of story," Darkie offered.

"You keep your ideas to yourself, mister."

The sound of footsteps was already close. Then I saw him.

His body was mesmerizing in its precision. Completely mechanized as it was, with complex servo drives, its parts and springs fitted to perfection, entwined in a maze of tubes filled with a brown liquid.

I shrank back into the wall as he walked past me, afraid he might see me. Still, a system message hurried to reassure me:

Your Stealth skill has increased to level 5.

So he walked past me and kept going: an unhurried confident gait as befitted the first Mechanoid in the whole of Mechilos.

With a heavy sigh, I climbed to my feet, took a few steps toward his back and hit him. Not with the Gramr though — despite the fact that my right hand had already closed around its hilt, to Darkie's celebratory catcalling. I just gave him a Godawful whack with my arm implant which was apparently perfectly suited for this purpose.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 16.

I didn't need it to tell me that my attack had been good. Cartos awkwardly flew a good twenty feet through the air and slumped to the ground, letting go of his stuff which rolled aside

At which point I'd expected him to groan like an old man, slowly trying to scramble back to his feet. Contrary to that, he sprang up to his feet and swung toward me.

Dammit.

I still hoped that he might strike a conversation, asking me who I was and what I wanted with him, or even whether we had the same values and shared the same philosophies. Instead, he took a rational approach: defeat the attacker first and ask questions later. And judging by the intent in his gait as he headed for me, he was about to give me a master class in the "defeat the attacker" part.

His mechanoid fingers flickered through the air, dealing me a crushing blow. Although invisible, it didn't make it any less destructive, as if he'd just placed the weight of the entire Mechilos onto my shoulders. This wasn't a spell — more like a Divine Avatar ability he had.

Still, I had something to surprise him with too.

[∞]

I somersaulted, escaping the clutches of his pounding blow. I was grazed by it, but that was nothing like the first time, only knocking off my

fake steely “skull”. I even managed to scramble back to my feet when Cartos decided to give his Divine Avatar tricks a miss and revert to more mundane combat tactic: namely, the good old punch-up.

His powerful punch wrestled a scream from me. My chest failed the test miserably, crumbling into a mash of flesh and bones.

[∞]

It was a good day for flying, judging by his new move. All I’d done, I’d dodged and yanked his hand just as he was about to punch me, sending him through the air. Still, this little scuffle was getting increasingly less justifying — especially because he was already back on his feet again. What if he went for me again now, like an enraged bull?

He didn’t. He must have realized that my boxing skills were better than his, so he switched to Greco-Roman wrestling. His huge mechanical arms closed around me, squishing me until my eyes began to pop. Although his grip left my forearms free, there was nothing I could do with them to help myself out of this predicament.

[∞]

I tried to duck and dive under him but he grabbed me by the shoulders, pressing me in his steely — literally — clinch. How I wished I had one of my Savior abilities — I used to have exactly the thing against the kind of friendly embrace like this.

Never mind. You wanted me to fight you, Sir? Well, take that!

While I was waiting for his permission to proceed, my Leader ability had come back live. Without waiting for my internal organs to be squeezed out through the nearest orifices, I hurried to activate it.

That seemed to surprise Cartos a lot. Like, really a lot. His seemingly pitbull grip began to relax, unable to cling to my armor.

Darkie sensed his chance and tried to break free through the gap in my willpower. Containing him was an incredibly hard job, but I did it. It felt like trying to keep down a bad bout of nausea — but after a while, it subsided.

Darkie was borrowing his strength from my Divine Avatars. And from the Gramr — but I had to use it! I withstood Cartos' new attack, then countered it with a single lunge — the most basic of sword moves which found its target, entering deep into the Manager's body.

Still, it did so without causing any apparent damage. Even though it had indeed gone through his armor, it had done so nominally, only sinking into his body halfway. This wasn't going to work, was it?

Much to Darkie's indignation, I sheathed the Gramr and got serious about defeating this tin can. After a brief and poor excuse for what must have looked like wresting, I tried to bring his mind under my control. Being a mechanoid can be cool — but let me tell you that having the powers of a Dark Avatar at your disposal is infinitely better. Some of Cartos' fighting moves were admittedly good, but soon I managed to twist his arm and press him to the floor, pinning him down with my leg. Only then did I reach for my Moon Steel dagger.

My intuition hadn't failed me. In this particular situation, the dagger was much more effective than the sword. Using it like an angle grinder, I had no problem detaching his right arm from his body. His other arm proved more difficult — primarily because there was something like a heart located right next to it: a weird contraption with loads of tubes radiating from it.

But of course! His brain remained human, didn't it? They may have replaced all the other stuff, but they still had to make provisions for the main human organ in his body.

"Don't worry," I heard myself saying. "I'm not gonna kill you."

I didn’t want to cut him any higher for fear of damaging something vital. As it was, without both arms and with his both legs damaged, it might take him a while to make it all the way to the temple guards.

But by the time I’d chopped off his other foot, I finally succumbed to the earlier bout of nausea. That had been Darkie, apparently desperate about my uselessness, trying to grab the reins again. Still, I wasn’t going to let him have his way. I was even obliged to prematurely disable Leader to weaken Darkie’s control over me. A great shame, but what did you want me to do? Going back to the customs guards in my current state would have been akin to sauntering in front of a Spanish bull dressed in red rags.

My disabling of Leader did the trick. Darkie protested one last time, then fell quiet, even though I continued to sense his bitter anger. From now on, there was no “we” in our reluctant relationship: it was me or him, period.

“Sorry man, nothing personal,” I told Cartos as I caught my breath, looking around the corridor in search of the staff. Finally, I saw it.

“You’re gonna regret it,” Cartos said. “You’ll have the whole of Mechilos on your case.”

“Well, firstly, I’ve been told that before by four or five other people. Not literally, of course, but the idea was the same. Secondly, you and a couple of Higher Orders do not the entire of Mechilos make. And thirdly, you should be grateful. I could have easily killed you. Think of all the sweet spells, skills and even Divine Avatars that the Fair-Eyed Cartos must have in his possession. But you’re still alive. They’ll fix you up, don’t you worry. With a new upgrade you’ll be stronger than ever.”

He prudently shut up, apparently realizing it was better not to provoke such a completely heartless scumbag like myself. I mean, what else would you call a Player who’d attacked you at the very heart of your sancta

sanctorum? And most importantly, why would he do that? I was pretty sure this was the question that puzzled Cartos the most.

I walked over to the staff and picked it up. Good toy. Heavy enough for your money. I doubted it contained any precious metals though — its most precious asset was in the stone that topped it.

A crystal of a shimmering green seemed to be calling my name, so dear and so familiar I wouldn't have been able to resist it. I picked it with the dagger. Finally I had it in my hands.

Your fame has increased to 26.

Your fame has increased to 27.

Your fame has increased to 28.

Your Reputation has changed to Atharim.

Farhall (Divine Stone)

It looks like you've already met.

They could bet their lives I had. I'd met it many times, if only in my fantasies. So what kinds of tricks would this wonderwaffle artifact show us?

I waited for a couple of seconds but apparently, no epic shows were coming. No mind-blowing magnetic effects, no spontaneous explosions at the local power station... impressive, yeah right.

I took out the other three stones — or should I say, I held the three already-joined stones in my left hand and this new one in my right. Despite a very slight magnetic pull, I really struggled to force it into its place.

Finally, a faint flash. The joined stones began to vibrate, then disappeared. I was holding something else in my hands instead: a hefty

round stone tablet, nicely hemmed and covered all over in runic writings which looked quite familiar to me.

All this was well and good, with one minor caveat: this contraption, made out of four Divine Stones joined together, just didn't seem to be working. I tried everything I knew to activate it, with zero results. What was that now? Pointless asking Cartos, but Litius just might shed some light on it, you never know.

In any case, I had to go back. I'd quite outstayed my welcome here.

"Sorry, man, I'm gonna take this stone, but at least I'll spare your life."

"Desecrator!" the Manager spat out.

"If you say so," I said, then hurried down the steps.

This whole incident had left me with mixed feelings. The anxiety at the prospect of having to face the customs officers again mingled with my anger at the stone refusing to produce the effect I'd expected. This might explain why by the time I ran out onto the temple square I was already quite strung out. Luckily, the customs were still a long walk away, allowing me to calm down.

The checkpoint wasn't crowded at all. The guards were busy checking two mechanoids about to enter. I put on my best poker face as I walked through the scanner but no one even looked at me. Trying to calm down my thrashing heart, I unhurriedly crossed the checkpoint and only then quickened my step — or should I say bolted for dear life.

Using the same tactic, I negotiated the checkpoint of the Second Order and soon stood before Sergo anxiously awaiting me.

"And? Is he dead? He is, isn't he?" he showered me with rather bizarre questions.

“Oh no, your manager is perfectly alive although rather worse for wear. I cut his feet off just a little to make sure he couldn’t run so fast anymore.”

“Oh,” he said, unable to conceal the disappointment in his voice. “You did maim him though, didn’t you?”

“You could say that.”

“It might be enough, you never know,” he said, thinking aloud. “Very well. Follow me now.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong but the stairs are in the opposite direction, aren’t they?”

He shook his head. “We can’t go there now. They’re going to sound the alarm any moment now and block all the exits. I know of another way out.”

What he’d said made perfect sense — and still I thought I could smell a rat. A very big stinky rat, if you know what I mean. Then again, there was nothing I could do. I just didn’t happen to have another mechanoid dude privy to all the finer aspects of local life. So I followed him into the Order proper.

To say it was a bizarre place would be an understatement. It was built every which way. While the lower Orders sported perfectly straight streets, these ones were winding, constantly forking and rejoining to make allowance for the beautiful stately mansions thrown up all over the place.

“So where’s this order you’re so proud of?” I asked. “Why aren’t these houses all lined up, nice and straight?”

“Well, if you have enough money and influence, you can always lobby your own idea of city planning — like setting up your own house

where you deem fit, even if it requires moving some of the existing buildings. But this is more of an exception than a rule."

"Yeah yeah. So much of an exception that these streets look more like a Moroccan medina. Why doesn't that surprise me? You always need to grease a palm or two, even if it's only a town planning Manager. Just as I was beginning to warm to this place."

Sergo shrugged, as if saying, *well, what did you want?* just as he took a left turn.

Had I not had Luber's map on me, I would have thought nothing about it. Still, according to my interface, this was exactly where the Customs Management of the Second and Third Orders was situated. Was it really what I thought it was?

"Here we are," Sergo said, stopping, as he pointed at a tiny garden stuck between mansions. A very nice place with a little fountain (the need for which was highly questionable here), a few benches and some excuse for what bits of green they could muster. On second thoughts, how could any vegetation grow here unsupported by any source of light? Was it even vegetation to begin with?

But that wasn't the point. Most importantly, Sergo seemed quite intent on dumping my company.

"Just sit here for a while, I'll be there and back," he said, waving a nonchalant hand in the direction of his supposed destination. "I won't be long."

"D'you really believe this bullshit?" Darkie raised an indignant voice.

I could tell he was still very angry with me for not killing Cartos. He'd been maintaining an offended silence all the way here — and had only decided to break it because he must have sensed trouble in the air.

But even without his help, I'd already worked out that Sergo was up to something. Not least because the place he'd just pointed at was the very same Customs Management.

He didn't get the chance to escape. My mechanical hand grabbed him, lifting him off the ground. This was quickly becoming the standard of our relationship. Admittedly, I struggled to keep this chunk of scrap metal in the air, but I managed, thanks to my Korl strength.

And just as I did it, a spine-chilling sound echoed over the city: the shrill ever-rising wailing of an alert warning. Sergo had been right: they were about to close all the checkpoints between the Orders.

"Speak up," I said.

"Speak up what? Sorry, I don't understand..."

He did look frightened enough to fool me, even if for a moment. But the dark, cynical part of me was quite skeptical of his words. And this was one of those cases where lack of trust in human honesty — or mechanoid honesty, as the case may be — was the right decision.

Besides, I had something that could loosen any tongue. I activated the Spilling the Beans ability, then asked him again, trying to be as precise as possible this time,

"Where did you want to go?"

"To the Customs Management of the Second and Third Orders," he replied impassively.

"Why?"

"To report a suspicious mechanoid hiding in one of the public gardens. Once they found him, they would have discovered that the number

of his implants didn’t justify his presence in the Second Order and the paperwork he had on him was a forgery.”

“What about my projection device, wouldn’t it work for them?”

“It was supposed to be disabled automatically as soon as the alarm sounded.”

I cussed with so much flourish and feeling that you’d think he’d appreciate my effort. Still, his face was as impassive as ever. Now he was only a puppet in my hands, unable to do anything but answer my questions.

“How did Letraine manage to circumvent the Oath? He swore he would help me to procure Farhall provided I delivered Inturia to him. He also swore he wouldn’t try to hinder my escape from Mechilos.”

“Letraine has nothing to do with it,” Sergo replied so coolly that I almost punched him. “I don’t work for him.”

“Who do you work for, then?” I asked even though I could already hear his answer in my head.

“For Orael,” he said, confirming my suspicions. “He told me to make sure you couldn’t leave Mechilos... alive.”

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Chapter 29

IN HIS *DIVINE COMEDY,* Dante billeted traitors in the last and most dreadful Circle of his Inferno. Quite rightly so, if you ask me. With one reservation: technically, Orael wasn't a traitor. You need to trust someone in order to let them betray you — but our relationship was far from friendly to begin with. The only error I'd made was in thinking that Orael was in cahoots with Letraine — and now I was paying the price.

According to Sergo's "singing" — because Spilling the Beans had done a wonderful job bringing out his eloquent side — I wasn't even Orael's main target. Which felt a bit disappointing, really. Apparently, I wasn't good enough to justify a conspiracy plot. And if you remember Letraine's earlier innuendo with the Manager of the Fifth Order who'd started creating problems for him — well, apparently, it was also Orael's work.

From what I'd gathered, at some point Letraine and Orael's ideas of business management had begun to diverge. Their growing client base called for the scaling up of their production — which was something the overly cautious crocman just refused to do.

So that was what pushed Orael to this decision. He had no intention of getting rid of Letraine, oh no. All he wanted was to temporarily take him out of circulation. And being a sentient creature, he knew better than to beat his chest shouting at Letraine that it was time they went their separate ways. On the contrary: Orael had "owned up" to the error of his ways, then unhurriedly began to lay the groundwork for the upcoming ouster of his own boss.

Then I'd arrived at the most opportune moment. Or rather, I'd managed to procure Inturia which had surprised Orael no end. That's what

had prompted him to devise a quick plan and come up with my own very humble role in it. I'd been supposed to penetrate the Highest Order and steal Farhall, ideally by either killing or maiming Cartos in the process.

Once they'd caught me, Letraine would have gotten all the blame. According to Sergo, Orael already had all the right "witnesses" ready to justify it. A quick interrogation session with an Abbas as a live lie detector tool would have driven the last nail into Letraine's proverbial coffin, exposing him as the mastermind behind this theft who'd dared to steal the crown jewels, so to speak. This world wasn't a democracy: they didn't treat coup conspiracies lightly here. Having said that, who does? Definitely not the so-called "civilized countries" allegedly bringing the light of freedom and justice to the rest of us.

Irrelevant, anyway. The main thing was, that would have taken care of Letraine at least for the time being, allowing Orael to save what business he could still muster, and also grooming the Manager of the Fifth Order for further cooperation. He would have risen through the ranks quickly enough if Orael's patience and money had anything to do with it.

As for Orael himself — well, even if the entire plot had come to light, he wasn't a Mechilos citizen and would by then have been far away from here.

I chuckled. So Orael *was* a traitor, after all, because he'd framed his own boss who'd always been correct with him. That also answered my question why he'd seemed to go out of his way to help me. I'd been racking my brains trying to work it out. He'd managed to convince Letraine to help me and even pull off that op in Cesspit which must have been quite expensive.

Still, all of this was their own little game. I had a much more pressing problem which concerned me personally: namely, how to get the hell out of here?

Sergo couldn’t tell me anything in this respect. Having spilled the beans about his main secret, he showed no intention of helping me to get out.

Never mind. This was only a temporary inconvenience.

With a heavy sigh, I took the moon steel dagger out of my inventory. I drew it along Sergo’s body, gently at first, severing the thinnest wires — more for fun rather than to deal any significant damage — until finally the dagger touched the flesh below.

“I want you to answer a very simple question,” I said. “How can I get out of Mechilos without using the stairs? Tell me.”

I pressed the blade against his neck. His skin parted like muslin sheared by very sharp scissors. Blood trickled down his mechanical body.

Sergo tried to scream but my grip on his throat was tight. All he could produce was a stifled wheeze. Slowly the dagger reached for his earlobe and began cutting through it, meticulously and unhurriedly, ignoring his kicking protests.

Then I came round. It felt like a bucket of icy-cold water being poured over a drunkard, instantly sobering him up.

That hadn’t been me!

“Oh please,” Darkie’s voice said sarcastically. *“Who are you trying to fool? I bet you even liked it.”*

I gnashed my teeth so hard that they screeched. Sergo must have misunderstood me became nodded frantically. He wasn’t in a good way as it was. Blood kept pouring from his severed earlobe, soiling his shoulder and part of my trench coat. I needed to clean and dress the wound. But first...

I pinned Sergo to the bench, hanging over him, threatening him with the knife just to make it clear he shouldn’t do anything stupid. Not that he had any intention to. He was only a petty scoundrel, not a loyal dog ready to lay his life for his master.

“It was them, they told me to do it,” he babbled, his mechanoid hands wiping blood and snot away.

“How do I get out of the city?” I enunciated.

“You can’t. No, listen! There’s one thing that connects all the Orders, and that’s the city’s sewage system. But you can’t use it to get out because it ends in a treatment station. If you end up in one of its pipes, you’re as good as dead.”

“Okay, but what if I get into the system in the Second Order and get out of it in the Ninth? Can you do it?”

“In theory, yes.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” I said, studying the map.

After a while, I managed to make out a few sewage system entry points. God bless Luber and his map! They were probably used to unblock any potential clogging, whatever the word implied. I could only hope that the Higher-Order mechanoids had made their digestive tract replacements a priority. I really didn’t look forward to bathing in the byproducts of their metabolic activity.

But most importantly, what was I supposed to do with Sergo?

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I looked at his bloodied frame.

“Oh give me a break,” the voice in my head said. *“You may have spared Cartos out of pure dumb humanity — or maybe just to piss me off —*

but this isn't the case! You know where he's gonna run the moment you leave, don't you?"

"I could bind him."

"What with — with bonds of love? You don't even have a rope. And even if you had one, the first patrol will discover him and set him free. You'll make it as far as the sewage exit, end of story."

As if in confirmation, I heard the clatter of several pairs of steel-shod boots in a nearby street. Could be a patrol.

"I could stun him with something..." I offered one last attempt to defend him.

"Are you always so stupid or is it an off day?"

Admittedly, he was right. Not about me being stupid, of course, but his suggestions made perfect sense. Letting Sergo live would mean exposing myself. And I was obliged to leave this place alive, whatever the cost.

"So what did you decide?" Sergo asked as if he could read my thoughts.

"Nothing. It's all right," I lied, stepping toward him.

A quick slash across the throat with my knife was all it took. He slumped, grabbing my hand. Sorry, man. There was just no other way.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2180. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

A change in development branch available: ***Ichthyochom****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Trepidation spell.

My hand shook as I returned the knife to my inventory. The worst thing was, I'd gotten a karma penalty for killing him, which meant he wasn't hostile to me nor did he really hate me at all. My chest was clenched with a nasty, nauseous feeling.

"You're not gonna cry, are you?" Darkie's voice commented.

I didn't reply, mechanically rummaging through Sergo's remains. About two hundred grams of dust, a citizenship application, a few lock picks, plus some weird-looking tools. I scooped everything up. They weighed virtually nothing but they might come in handy, you never know.

The nearest manhole cover was three houses down the street, adjacent to the pyramid's side. I wouldn't say I walked slowly but I wasn't running either, for fear of attracting attention. In doing so, I actually managed to blend in with the scenery because the wailing of the alarm had somewhat disconcerted the normally unperturbed dwellers of the Second Order. From what I'd gathered, this wasn't something they encountered every day, judging by their reserved movements and wary whispers.

Never mind, guys. Enjoy it while I'm here.

As for the actual manhole cover, it did manage to surprise me. Not because it was unusual in the gold-and-diamonds kind of way, oh no. It was just a regular manhole cover about three feet in diameter, sitting in a blind alley between two houses. The only difference being, it had a maze puzzle embossed on the lid — which was locked.

The funny thing was, the key to it was right there, a square key with lots of empty grooves in the middle. The only problem was, it was built into

the cover. In order to release it, you had to move it up and down the maze puzzle, giving it an occasional turn.

Dammit! Was it the end of it all? Shit! Bastard! I'd killed Sergo for nothing! He might have even known how to open this wretched thing! There was no way I could do it on my own. Even if I moved the key this way... and then a little in the opposite direction... and then turned it like this... and moved it over there... and here you go!

Your Burglary skill has increased to level 1.

Pardon me? What did they mean, burglary? Okay, so the key was in my hand now — but how on earth had I done it?

"That's the Mechanics skill, you idiot!" Darkie exploded. *"How stupid can you be? Probably, all the local technicians must have it. Are you gonna stand here in full view of everyone or are you gonna put the key in the lock already?"*

I'd never thought I'd say this, but he had a point.

I opened the hatch and choked. This was definitely no Chanel No 5. Still, there was no helping it. I had to get going.

"Shut the hatch behind you," the voice reminded.

"Just don't tell me we're a team," I parried.

The voice chuckled. *"I'm not going to. I'm just waiting for the right moment. And I don't think I'll have to wait long."*

"How do you know?"

"Well, at some point you'll be obliged to fight your way out of the city, won't you? That's when you'll become enraged and activate your Divine Avatar abilities in order to kill people..."

I winced and cast Light to take a good look around me.

The good news was, the city sewage was of the open type, which meant no pipes and things. They even had a few grates in the ceiling to let fresh air in. The bad news was that it ran the perimeter of the entire pyramid, which meant that with every Order, I was obliged to walk much longer distances.

For a start, I removed all my clothes and put them away in the inventory, then stepped with my bare feet onto the grate covered with sludge. I would have understood if it were, er, organic waste, but why would they pour engine oil down the sewage? Having said that, they were mechanoids, weren't they?

After a brief deliberation, I started walking. I must have looked weird: a stark naked dude taking a stroll down the local sewage. Hopefully, they didn't have shrinks in Mechilos. But this wasn't what I should be thinking about now. The city was now teeming with guards on high alert, the only question was whether they'd think of checking the sewage.

The thought made me quicken my step to a run. Pausing to catch my breath wasn't even an option because with every new level, it was getting increasingly harder. By the time I'd finally made it to the Ninth Order, I was staggering, my head made of stone, my eyes square with the strain.

"Don't!" Darkie snapped as I attempted to barge out onto the street. *"Check the flippin' map!"*

He was right again. Had I come out here, I'd have found myself only a stone's throw away from the central square and the staircase. That would have been a disaster.

So I was obliged to muster the rest of my strength and soldier on for another 200 yards where finally I managed to stagger out.

The hot air of the Ninth Order felt so palpably delicious that I could eat it with a spoon. Still, I hurried to close the hatch and steal a look around. Inconspicuous at higher levels, here I was bound to attract attention: in less than ten seconds, I'd already encountered two of the local dwellers who cringed as they turned their heads toward me. No point overstaying my welcome here.

I looked around and very nearly wept with joy as I saw a tap next to the manhole. I could have sworn I hadn't seen anything like it back at the Second Order. Most likely, it was due to the fact that here the sheer volume of waste was considerably higher, prompting them to create these impromptu washing facilities for sewage technicians.

I opened the tap and hurried to wash the muck off myself, casting wary glances at the passersby. Judging by the smell, the tap water wasn't meant for drinking. I would have cleaned myself up nicely had it not been for the fact that I was in a hurry. Then I put my clothes back on and walked out onto the street, eventually mixing with the crowd.

The main square was seething with protests, mainly from all those who wasn't allowed to leave. There were lots of customs officers here now, many more than before, and they'd pushed everyone back from the scanners. Still, they looked pretty lost as if they didn't know what to do next, either.

Okay, so what was *I* supposed to do? How was I supposed to get out? Shame I'd used up Leader, otherwise I could have put my armor on and just fought my way out. It might have worked, you never know. My Impermeability was still in cooldown — and without it, none of the other abilities would work. Metamorphosis didn't seem to fit the bill, either. Dammit! Think, man, think.

Darkie was conspicuous by his silence. Apparently, his evil overlord mind couldn't come up with any solutions, either.

I was about to get desperate when suddenly I saw *him*. My only chance to save my bacon. Only now did I notice that he wasn't a regular customs officer — okay, maybe not top brass but he was definitely one of the commanders.

I pushed through the crowd, using my bionic arm and powerful stature — but especially my rather unorthodox smell that the earlier wash had refused to remove — for a bit of extra persuasion. Once I was close and within his line of vision, I shouted,

"Defir! Defir!"

Only now did I realize that I'd never asked his brother's name. Never mind. It worked, anyway.

The customs officer swung round, surveying the crowd from under his frowned eyebrows. Then his face dissolved in a smile as he finally noticed me.

"Sorry!" he said, trotting toward me. "I didn't notice you at first!"

He wrinkled his nose — but apparently, no amount of effluvia could ruin my Reputation with his family. "We've got an emergency here!" he told me.

"I know. I've just come from the top, haven't I? It's a drill. They thought you guys hadn't had one in a while. So they decided to check you."

"Oh really?" the officer asked doubtfully.

"Sure. They've already checked the top orders and are gradually coming down now. You might be stuck here for another couple of hours."

"Oh for crying out loud! They're worse than Kabirids!" the officer cussed. "Oops, sorry, I didn't mean it," he hurried to add. "We're supposed to be politically correct here."

“Cool it,” I said. “I’m not a big fan of those bats myself. Listen, I just need to pop out of town for an hour. Think you could help me?”

“I can’t. I’d love to, but we’ve got orders. It’s the Captain who runs the coop here. That’s him over there, checking the approaches to the staircase.”

“He won’t be a Captain for very long,” I whispered in the officer’s ear. “They’re not happy with him upstairs, if you know what I mean. From what I heard, they were thinking about finding a replacement for him. This drill might see him demoted. I could put in a word for you, if you wish.”

“No shit?”

I nodded.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 28.

No idea what worked in the end: whether it was my Quiric status, my reputation and title with his family, or my knack for spinning a lie. Could be all of it together. Whatever the case, the customs officer gave me a resolute nod. He motioned to the guards to let me through and invited me to follow him.

That was when I realized the full meaning of being out of one’s depth. It’s when an entire squareful of people glares at you, secretly wishing they could rip you apart while you’re trying to keep a deadpan face, pretending it’s business as usual. The other customs officers appeared to share the feeling — but my friend didn’t seem to have any problems with them.

“This gentleman is a trusted representative of His Excellency Cartos the Fair-Eyed. Let him through. I accept the responsibility.”

I gulped. If he only knew how deeply in the shit he was putting himself! Still, I had no time to feel sorry for his poor trusting soul. The

Captain could come back any moment now, and that would put an end to my little escapade. I strode resolutely through the hermetic gate.

Outside, the crowd's glares weren't so hateful anymore — mainly because a lot of them were members of the Order of Trashmen who had considerable respect for me.

Trying not to run, I made it to the bar. My little team was already waiting for me by the entrance — probably thanks to Arts' sharp eye.

"Gosh, Serge," she said, pinching her nose. "I dread to ask where you've been."

"It's all right. I was in the sewage pipe."

"B-b-but how d-d-did it go? We heard alarms wail-l-ling."

"This," I said, pulling out the hefty round tablet covered in runic writings: the result of the four stones merging.

"B-b-but... t-t-this is..."

I nodded. "Gatekeepers' language. I saw similar writings hanging over the Gatehouse."

"What does it say?"

"I don't know, and I don't think we should ask Gatekeepers. They might take it away from us."

"Sorry guys, if you don't mind me interrupting... hic! interrupting your learned dis... discussion," Traug's slurring drunken voice butted in, "I suggest we discuss it on our way out. I've had enough of this place. Their ale is absolute shit!"

“Finally I can hear a Korl say something reasonable for a change,” Arts said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“I’m afraid it’s t-t-too l-l-late...”

I swung round, following the direction of Litius’ gaze.

My hand reached for the Gramr on its own accord as I watched a crowd of guards pour out of the gate like a sea of lava. They started hustling the crowd aside. I saw a huge Kabirid among them — probably the Captain mentioned earlier — and next to him, none other than Defir himself.

Before I could take all of that in, Defir — who I thought was supposed to be a close friend of mine — pointed his finger at me.

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Chapter 30

THE SURVIVAL of a single extraordinary individual is worth how many human lives, exactly? How do you decide you're the one with the right to demand that others lay down their own lives for you? Do you even have the right to do so? And even if you do, how are you supposed to appraise your own superiority?

I wasn't a brilliant general capable of sending a whole army to their deaths from the safety of his office. Still, this was the moment when I just couldn't afford to worry about the lives of others.

"We've got to get to the Gatehouse!" I shouted to the Trashmen who poured out onto the street. "Don't let them catch us!"

This was a cross between an order and a plea, and it did work. How could it be otherwise? Luber had given me too much power in exchange for his brother's blade. He might regret it later. But that would be then. And now, all hell broke loose.

The eternal conflict between "them" and "us" had just acquired a new meaning. At first it reminded me of a soccer fan brawl with lots of shouting, jostling and knife-waving. But almost instantly it became clear this wasn't going to end well.

A new game message promptly confirmed my worst suspicions.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2280. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2380. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2480. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2580. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -2680. You gravitate to the Dark Side...

I could swear I could sense Darkie's predatory grin. Of course. My plea for help was akin to issuing a quest to my fellow clan members — a quest they couldn't deny. Which meant that the entire responsibility for their actions rested entirely on my shoulders. And as far as I could see, the Trashmen had no intention of pussyfooting around their opponents. They couldn't care less about penalties and potential consequences. Their distinguished fellow clan member had asked them for help, the rest was irrelevant.

"Let's run," Arts said, pulling me by the hand.

Litius was already a good fifty feet ahead, his tail anxiously twitching, making it perfectly clear he had no intention of staying here any longer than absolutely necessary.

Clad in full armor, Traug eyed the brawl melancholically as both his nature and the liquor in his blood demanded he joined in the fray. But even he finally swung round and gave me a shove in the back, making it clear we needed to make ourselves scarce.

So we did.

As we ran, I kept a wary eye on my plummeting karma. I could hear the Captain scream and shout behind us as he ordered the crowd to comply while mechanoid guards hacked through the crowd, for want of a nicer word, mowing down Trashmen order members. The dust of fallen Players rose in our wake; the air reverberated with their screams.

“Lots of blood will be spilled today,” the Dark “me” said philosophically. “I had no idea it would be so easy.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, failing to ignore his remark.

“The way I handled you. I chose a primitive approach. I just tried to break free, waiting to catch you off guard. While in fact it’s all so much easier. All I had to do was leave you in control, then wait for you to surrender your body to me on a silver platter. I’m not going to remind you what’s gonna happen once your karma drops to minus five thousand.”

Just as he said it, I glimpsed yet another message flash past,

You’ve killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -3280. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

By now, the guards had regrouped and kept pressing on the crowd, which brought their losses down a lot. The number of dead Trashmen was now several times more than their attackers and kept growing. Still, yet new clan members hurried to their aid, their flow trickling into the full river

which carried its waters further on, taking more living creatures to their deaths.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -3380. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

"We're almost there," Arts said, as if trying to cheer me up, sensing the weight burdening my heart.

And just like it often happens, she spoke too soon. Jinxed me, if you wish. The thing was, nothing really prevented anyone from attacking Mechilos from the air. I hadn't seen any anti-air warfare here. Okay, they had those nets, but only in top Orders.

And now it worked against us, because a new flying squad — literally flying — had just arrived from the city.

This was truly incredible. Inconceivable. They flew side by side, bathing in the beams of searchlights which had come on atop the city walls to chase after us. Archali and Kabirids, feathered wings mixing with the leathery ones. Sworn enemies, whose hatred for each other was nurtured since infancy, they were now part of one single whole: the city of Mechilos. They were its defenders now.

In fact, "feathered wings" was a bit of exaggeration. All of them, the Archali as well as the Kabirids had had their natural wings replaced with wide, elongated, crescent-shaped sheets of steel. Symmetrical and wafer-thin, they gave me the impression of being razor-sharp. I could only hope I never got a chance to check that out.

"That's the end of little kittens," Arts said slowly. "Sorry Lish, I didn't mean you. Then again, maybe I did."

The worst thing was, we'd almost reached the Gatehouse by now. Maybe another sixty seconds' worth of distance run — but we didn't have them.

I drew the Gramr, not yet knowing how we were going to go about it. There were four of us — but one of us wasn't an able-bodied fighter even, just a frightened catman. All in all, we had my four time rewinds, plus Arts' staff and Traug's righteous fury. Divided by a good fifty "birds", there was no way we could defeat them.

Dammit!

"There's no way we can defeat them," Traug said, echoing my thoughts. "I'm gonna distract them. As soon as they switch their attention to me, you just go for it! Just run!"

"What about you?"

"I can always blend into the crowd," Traug said recklessly, winking at me.

In the gloom, his face looked deadly ashen under his helmet. With an impatient wave, he motioned us to duck and looked up, ready to face the diving attackers.

A greenish mist began seeping out from under his armor, quickly filling the air around him. It drifted about two feet above the ground, rapidly rising and allowing us to breathe freely. By the time the city's flying defenders had reached us, Traug had transformed the whole area around us into a huge cloud which floated slowly but surely toward the Gatehouse.

We crept along underneath it, doubled up, afraid of raising our heads more than absolutely necessary. I cast occasional glances at my interface — and what I saw there didn't make me happy.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -4380. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

The city's feathered guards didn't hesitate for very long. Soon we were showered with spells, spears and arrows. One of the spells stripped Arts of her protection shield, another singed Litius' coat. A couple of spears must have hit Traug, judging by the cheerful clatter of metal against metal. Still, assessing the lower half of Traug's body which I could see, he didn't appear too discomfited. He just kept walking as usual.

Half a dozen of the most impatient "birds" tried to get to us under the cover of the mist, and paid the price. Traug's development branch may not be too theatrical — Traug himself even seemed to be slightly embarrassed of it, for some reason — but it sure did what it was supposed to do.

The only problem was, all good things have to come to an end. After a couple of minutes of our crab-like advance, the mist began to dissipate. And the Gatehouse was already within reach, a mere fifty feet or so away.

"Run!" Traug shouted, trying to squeeze out the last dregs of his ability. For a moment, the mist thickened — still, I knew very well it was about to disperse.

Arts gave me an almighty slap on the back, giving my legs enough momentum to propel me forward. Several jets of flames hit the jet-black sky as she tried to drew the attackers' attention to herself before darting toward the Gatehouse. Litius overtook us in two powerful leaps and shot inside; he immediately offered me his paw, dragging me inside, then hurried out again to pull Arts in.

The girl was in a bad way. One of the attackers' weapons must have grazed her. A ragged wound gaped under her knee, gushing blood all over the entrance. Still, she showed no intention of using her album or her inventory to treat her injuries. Instead, she peered hard into the dark alleyway where we'd left Traug.

I followed her gaze, and my body erupted in heat. Traug was looking back at us, trying to force a smile, but a trickle of blood was already running down the corner of his mouth. Spears had pierced his thick armor in several places; he'd broken off their shafts which made him look like a skinned porcupine. A very dying skinned porcupine.

Several of the flying guards had already landed nearby, keeping a respectful distance. Others circled the air above the Gatehouse, their eyes firmly fixed on us.

One last time Traug raised his hand as if trying to reach out to us. He opened his mouth to say something — but blood gushed out, spilling onto the black soil all around him.

Losing the last of his strength, Traug collapsed to his knees, then dropped face down. He crumbled to dust almost instantly.

"Nooo!"

Two pairs of hands grabbed me, trying to keep me inside. Arts' fiery breath was very close as she whispered hotly, so fast that it took me a while to work out what she was on about,

"Serge, you can't change anything now. He knew what he was doing. You'll only make it worse. You might not come back, either! Think about that! Please!"

I couldn't bring myself to reply. My head was humming. An unbearable heat was pressing at my chest from within. A lump was blocking my throat.

Traug. Traug...

Now that the guards felt safe to approach, they were unceremoniously rummaging through his ashes, discussing their contents. It took me a while

to realize they were trying to provoke me.

Still, Arts had been right. The risk of me not coming back was too high. And I mean it literally, not metaphorically. Because inside me, Darkie was already tensed up like a loaded spring prepared to uncoil.

I chuckled bitterly as I glanced at the last system message.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: -4980. You gravitate to the Dark Side.

A single wrong move, and Darkie would escape, replacing me in my own body and sending me deep down the very depths of my own soul, to rot there for all eternity.

I'd made enough errors today as it was. Time to close this show.

Another "flying squad" showed over the city walls, heading for us. They weren't really necessary: those swarming over the Gatehouse would have been plenty to finish us off — provided we weren't under the Gatekeeper's protection. Still, we'd made it. We were safe. And we'd paid the price: in Traug's own life as well as those of the many Trashmen.

It hurt so bad as if it was me who'd died there, not him. I may have not died fully, but I'd left some part of me there. My heart stung; my whole body shuddered from waves of heat flooding over me. Traug was dead. Dead.

Still, I found enough composure to issue one final order.

"Let's go," I said, then staggered toward the bowl.

The Gatekeeper stared down at us impassively from under his closed helmet, as if nothing had happened. As if it wasn't my friend that had just

been killed. As if none of it really mattered in the grand scheme of things.

That really hurt. On impulse I reached out for the round stone tablet made from the merging of the four Divine Stones and held it defiantly in front of his nose.

“Put it away,” the Gatekeeper’s steely voice resounded through the room like a roll of April thunder. “This place can only have one seal: the one that belongs to Him who can open portals to other worlds.”

My hand quivered. I felt my anger dissipate like sand slipping through fingers, leaving only bitterness behind.

Well, at least now I knew what it was. I put the artifact away and poured the right amount of dust into the bowl. Time to leave this place.

We didn’t say a word to each other as we stepped out of the Gatehouse in my home city. As if on cue, we went to the Syndicate and took a table in a far corner. Litius fetched some disgusting strong brew which really suited our mood. We drank it without toasting, then drank some more. Gradually, our tongues untied.

“He was a good man,” Arts said.

“A good Korl,” Litius corrected her.

“I’ve never learned to say ‘creatures’ instead of ‘people’. To me, they’re people all the same. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

Her tongue was slightly slurring with the drink. And I... I suddenly felt terribly awkward as I realized that Traug deserved something better than grim funeral talk in a Syndicate, of all places. Everything here seemed to suffocate me. So I stood up.

“Stay with us,” Arts said.

“Sorry, I can’t,” I said, then added after a moment’s hesitation, “I don’t feel like it. I need to get some fresh air.”

I literally jogged out of the Community. The wind sent gusts of fine prickly snow drifting just above the ground. TV aerials on the roofs tried to stand up to the blizzard’s assault. The rare passersby trotted impatiently home, looking forward to a mug of hot tea cuddling up to the warm flanks of their radiators. Me, I unbuttoned my trench coat and walked unhurriedly, feeling no desire to dial a cab. I had nowhere to hurry. I needed to put my thoughts in order.

Still, just as I was halfway back home, I received a phone call. Which was the strangest thing of all. You could count on one hand the number of people — or creatures, rather — who could do it. Two of them I’d just left behind in the Community. My sister was too busy learning the ropes of her new job as a Guard. My parents... I should get used to the thought that I didn’t have them anymore. Who could it be, then?

“Yes?” I said.

“Hi Serge,” Oliverio’s voice said.

“Hi,” I struggled to reply, fully aware of the falsehood of these civilities.

“We’ve received a reply regarding your query. There’s no record of any Preceptor Illus that we know of. He could be using a fake name. One thing I don’t understand is why would whoever it was sign that letter with a non-existing name to begin with?”

“That makes two of us,” I said. “Just another dead end.”

“Serge,” Oliverio paused. “Is something the matter?”

“It’s okay. Just game business as usual,” I struggled to say through the lump in my throat, trying to swallow down tears.

No idea what time it was when I'd finally made it home. I made a point of not checking the clock. It looked like it might have been either late at night or very early in the morning. Bumpkin wasn't asleep, peeking anxiously from the room. Could a house goblin pick up on his master's state of mind? Possible.

"Fancy a bite to eat?" he asked just in case, even though he seemed to know the answer.

I shook my head, peeled off the boots and began to undress, finally ripping off the steely contraption that the Zverg master had fitted around my neck before my trip to Mechilos. Then I staggered into the bathroom, my shoulders stooping with guilt, my eyes sunken. As I stared into the mirror, I was surprised to discover a few gray hairs — like, completely gray, from ends to roots.

"The Game doesn't make you any prettier, does it?" Darkie chuckled.

His voice sounded so sharp and clear that I nearly jumped. In all these last hours, he hadn't said a word as if he didn't exist at all. Still, I shouldn't have hoped for a miracle. Then again, right now I could use someone to talk to.

"The Game isn't always a gift," I replied.

"Sure. It can be a curse too. Talking about which, I could take it from you."

"Like hell you will."

"Yeah yeah. You've taught me to be patient. We could discuss it at a later date."

With that, he fell silent. Had he taken offense? I just couldn't tell. Then again, he had a point. I was literally one step away from hitting 5,000

negative Karma and activating the Avatars' auxiliary abilities. The tiniest transgression on my part would mean that Darkie would get it all.

I washed my face and went to bed. At least I couldn't do anything stupid while asleep.

Still, I just couldn't sleep. I lay there staring at the dark ceiling, unable to shake off the enormity of my guilt. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see Traug's face staring back at me. His gaping mouth, overflowing with hot red liquid.

There was nothing I could have done. The four paltry seconds just wouldn't have cut it. I would have needed much more time than that.

Excuses, excuses... so many of them, but none of them could bring me any peace.

"Master," Bumpkin ventured, "I've cleaned up your clothes and patched up your coat a bit. What do you want me to do with that piece of gray junk?"

"Which piece of gray junk?"

Bumpkin vanished with a pop, then reappeared, holding the fake "implant" I'd just peeled off my neck. No idea what had prompted me to drag it all the way back home. Moonlight reflected off the useless piece of steel, illuminating Bumpkin's puzzled face.

"It's not gray," I said. "It's sort of silvery. Do whatever you want with it, I don't care. Just chuck it out."

"Gray, silvery," Bumpkin grumbled, heading back into the kitchen. "It's all the same, isn't it?"

I jumped, tensing up. "What did you just say?"

“Oh no, nothing,” he hurried to correct himself. “Just talking to myself. You know I can say all sorts of stupid things. Just don’t mind me. It’s nothing to worry yourself about.”

“Oh yes it is. What you’ve just said makes perfect sense. It *is* all the same. Can I get my clothes back, please?”

“Master, please! Don’t even think—”

“Bring me my clothes back *now! Please!”*

I struggled into my pants, thinking how it all fitted together. The missing bit of the jigsaw puzzle had been there in full view all along, and I’d just refused to see it! This was exactly what had made me so uncomfortable when we’d left that wretched city in that wretched world!

I jumped into the boots, draped the coat over my shoulders and drew the Gramr out, checking it. It was still there as was the rest of my stuff, all present and correct.

“Where would you go at this hour, Master? The roosters are about to crow!”

“I think I’m gonna pay a courtesy call to one particular traitor I know.”

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Chapter 31

ONE OF THE GROUND RULES in chess play is that you should either play against your equal or someone who's better than you. That's the only way you can improve. Easy wins make you feeble, weakening your brain.

Which was exactly what had happened to my "friend".

The brightly lit entry windows of his house — a standard suburban five-story apartment block — stared sadly back at me. I'd only been here once, before meeting Two-Face — who was still called Jan at the time. We'd had a few drinks in a cheap bar nearby — but still I'd managed to remember the address. This quiet suburbia risked having its share of unrest tonight. Imagine the neighbors' surprise when they discovered two dead bodies next door. One of which would belong to one very cute blond young man... no, scratch that. No one's gonna discover anyone. Because both of them were Players, weren't they?

The ancient doorbell covered with old splashes of white paint began to rattle under my thumb. The entryway was dark. Although there was some lighting at higher stories, some bastard must have stolen the lightbulb from the hallway. Can't say I found it convenient. I had no intention of hiding. Quite the contrary.

"Who's that?" the familiar voice asked behind the door.

"Lish, it's me. Can I come in? I've got something to tell you."

"S-s-serge?"

"S-s-serge," I mocked as I leaned my weight against the door.

Any regular human being would be unlikely to even move it on its hinges. My Korl blood, however, gave me an advantage. The door frame crunched as I forced it out, lock and all. My eyes were assaulted by the weak glow of a cheap bare lightbulb hanging off the ceiling from a piece of white cable.

Litius stood tense as if preparing to jump. Without taking my eyes off him, I walked in and tried to sort of close the door behind me.

“I d-d-don’t understand...”

He looked anxious. I caught a whiff of alcohol in the air. He and Arts must have stayed in the Syndicate for a while after I’d left. Still, he wasn’t drunk. Which was good. Excellent.

“Mind inviting your friend here?” I asked.

“Which f-f-friend?”

“Resetter, of course. Your pragmatic streak does backfire on you sometimes. Why would you pay someone to lodge your friend when you can put him up at your own place? Cheap and cheerful. So where’s he?”

Litius made a sharp movement. I whipped out the Gramr. The sight of the sword which could strike through any defense must have sobered him up somewhat.

At the same time, it awoke Darkie. It felt like a thick blind wall rising before me, pressing me down. My head went round momentarily. Still, this was only him using his new tactic, testing my limits. He promptly retreated back into his shell, allowing me to make the last fatal errors.

“That’s stupid, Lish, really. You know I have four time rewinds. You may be agile as a cat but it ain’t gonna help you. Is your friend in?”

The catman nodded slowly, apparently struggling to work out the right strategy to deal with me. You may have a computer for brain, mister, capable of memorizing enormous amounts of data — but quick mental reactions have never been your forte.

I looked over the corridor. The kitchen and bathroom were to the left. The door to one of the rooms was directly opposite me; the door to the other one was to my right.

“You go first,” I told my ex-friend.

Litius was prudent enough to do as he was told, even though his tail kept twitching, betraying his anxiety. I wasn’t surprised.

His apartment was almost identical to mine — slightly bigger maybe, but similarly decked out with old furniture, dusty curtains and faded wallpaper. With one correction: I didn’t have a wolfman in mine. A wolfman best known as Resetter.

Poor bastard. He shook so hard when he saw me that I could hear his teeth chatter.

“Well, well, well,” I said. “Talk about a cat and dog relationship. Would you mind stepping away from the window, gentlemen? I know what you’re like. Trust you to make a go for it.”

I steered them into the corner by the door, then slumped onto the sagging couch, keeping the sword at the ready. The couch was very uncomfortable, with a loose back spring which kept pressing against my side. Still, those two were even more uncomfortable.

“B-b-but h-h-how....”

“Are you asking me? Good question, Lish. Mind if I ask you first, please? What color is this?” I pointed at a Delft figurine on display in the cupboard.

“B-b-blue...”

“Great try. You, Mister Wolf?”

“Blue...ish.”

Resetter turned out to have an impressive voice, deep and sonorous. Very appropriate for someone like him.

“You’re both right, gentlemen. Still, there’re so many different shades of blue in it, don’t you think? There’s navy, and azure, and even a bit of sea foam green... honestly, I don’t even know the names for them all. The fact remains, every color comes in a variety of shades. And beastmen can’t tell shades apart very well, can they?”

I produced the note in the Archalus language. The one signed “Preceptor Illus”. The one that Litius and I had found among our dead attacker’s ashes.

“And here’s the proof,” I said. “Think that I had it on me all this time! I had a funny feeling about it but I just couldn’t quite put my finger on it. So let’s try it again. Lish, what color is the ink?”

“Dark... dark red. Crimson.”

“Exactly. You’re dead right. It is indeed crimson. But you know what the problem is? The note that we found on that dead dude, it was written in *purple* ink. A slight oversight on the part of such a mega computing mind as yours, and simply because beastmen can’t see different shades of color very well. But I can. I remembered it. Only it took me a while to work out what bothered me so much.”

“But I... I...”

“You hired those three dudes. One of which is standing right here next to you. You must have made an agreement with them, telling them to knock you out provided their attack had failed. What were you hoping for? Never mind. It didn’t work, anyway. Two of them got killed. Then we found a note, written in the Archalus language, and you seemed reluctant to tell me what it was about. So you made it all up, some sort of bullshit, claiming that’s what it was about. You even came up with that Preceptor Illus who apparently signed it. I can’t blame you. Adlibbing is an art. You can’t expect to spin a perfect lie every time.”

I paused, watching Litius’ reaction. His tail kept twitching — but other than that, he was silent. So I was obliged to continue.

“Then we went to the maze, managed to escape from those monsters and got to the city. You left me with those drug dealers — no idea whether you really wanted them to help me or that was a part of another scheme of yours. The fact remains, you left to fetch Arts and Traug — but before that, you popped in at the local market by the city gates and bought the ink and this piece of parchment I’m holding in my hands now. My question is: why did you have to make a fake copy of the note and what did it say, exactly?”

No reply. Litius’ frowned stare was drilling a hole in me. His tail lived a life of its own. Still, he remained silent.

“You know all about the abilities that come with the Destroyer Avatar, don’t you? They allow me to untie any tongue. I don’t think you’ll appreciate being a dumb puppet in my hands. So?”

I was bluffing, simply because I’d already spent Spilling the Beans on making Sergo speak. Still, Litius couldn’t know that. So he believed me.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 28.

“You... you w-w-won’t und-d-derstand...”

“Try me.”

“We’ve always been some sort of second best creatures here in the Game.”

“We? You mean beastmen?”

“That’s right. They evicted us from our planets to the wastelands of Ullum thinking we’d be only too happy to accept our lot. But our hearts still harbor a hope for liberation. As soon as I’d become a Player, I started traveling between worlds watching what was going on. I knew that one day we’d be able to win our homes back.”

In saying this, Litius transformed before my very eyes. Hunched and fearful only a moment ago, he now stood tall as he spoke about his people, his eyes fiery, his hair bristling, his tail high in the air as if he was about to attack me, ready to avenge the genocide of his kinsmen.

“That’s how I met Woof,” Litius said, nodding at the wolfman. “They were running a small organization tasked with providing aid for our brothers while making preparations for an open war. Thanks to my knowledge and investments, we managed to expand quite considerably, until one day I went to Cesspit in order to find an artifact stolen by some devils living near a water supply canal. Instead, I got caught in a trap...”

“And the rest is history,” I said, summing up the story of our first meeting. “I don’t remember seeing any artifact, though.”

“I stashed it away while searching the devils’ den,” Litius replied. “Then I sold it and sent the money to my brothers.”

“So all this time you’ve been thinking how to sell me to the highest bidder, is that it?”

“No,” he said, visibly embarrassed. “On the contrary. I thought that finally I’d met a decent creature among non-beastmen. The same applies to

Arts and Traug. They weren't perfect — but they were good people nonetheless."

The way he said it made me lean forward — but he hurried to correct himself. "I mean, Traug was a good person. And Arts still is. She's fine."

"So what happened, then?"

"He got too carried away," the wolfman growled. "He forgot about our mission. I was obliged to remind him of our ultimate goal."

"The freedom of an entire race far outweighs the friendship of two creatures," Litius said, lowering his eyes.

"So when did it start? When did you sell me?"

"A long time ago. On our first visit to Skirtsville. I made an agreement with an Iorolf from one of the Central Worlds, but things got out of hand..."

"Wait a sec. Wasn't it when someone attacked Skirtsville's Community?"

"Exactly," Litius said with a new harsh note to his voice. "Those Central World idiots think they're the center of the Universe. They just can't get it into their heads that when someone tells them that they have a RV in twenty hours, it means twenty hours local time! That was a mistake. We hired some mercenaries — but instead of waiting for the signal nicely, they started a massacre! And the guy who'd commissioned it demanded I paid damages for the time wasted. That's when I realized that when you want something done, you'd better plan it yourself."

"You'd better *do* it yourself, even. Unfortunately, you weren't that brilliant either, were you?"

“That idiot Korl who attacked you in the street wasn’t supposed to talk to you. All he had to do was throw the dart at you, end of story. Paralysis works instantly. You wouldn’t have had time to react.”

“Were you there?”

‘Of course. It was me who’d brought the sedative. But that idiot ruined everything, didn’t he? So I was obliged to summon my best beastmen.”

“You mean Hitman, Kraken and this dude here?”

“By my estimation, they should have been able to take care of you.”

“And still their attempt failed too. That’s when you must have decided to try your luck again, in the canyon this time.”

“Yes. Only that time I decided to play it safe in case they failed too.”

“By taking you out first?”

“Yes. I thought you might use your time rewinds to save me,” Litius said, sounding slightly offended. “In which case Woof would have reset you back to zero and Kraken would have immobilized you.”

“And still things didn’t go as planned — again. Not that I care. You’d better tell me why you had to swap that note.”

“You mean this one?”

He whipped it out so quickly I didn’t get the chance to react. No harm done, anyway. No point rewinding time.

Litius lobbed the scrap of parchment at my feet. I picked it up.

“This isn’t a note,” he said. “This is one of our pamphlets calling for the immediate termination of all discrimination against beastmen. It addresses all of our brothers and those sympathetic to our cause. I told them to make sure they didn’t have any personal effects on them — nothing that could have led them to us in case of their death. But Illus wouldn’t listen, would he? He was too cocksure of the success of our mission.”

“An Archalus fighting for beastmen’s rights,” I said, rising back to my feet. “I think I’ve seen it all. So you came up with a new message apparently written on that parchment, then tried to slip it to me. Funny, really. Such a tiny detail, but it brought this entire house of cards down in its enormity.”

“Traug’s death wasn’t my fault,” Litius’ whiskers quivered. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Except me. But even that isn’t really ill-meaning, is it? I just happened to be a bargaining chip in your Napoleonic schemes. Never mind. If Traug’s death had been your fault, you wouldn’t have been standing here now, believe me. It’s entirely somebody else’s fault, I’m afraid.”

“Are you... are you gonna kill us?” Litius asked sneakily.

“Well, you see, that’s the least I could do. But I can’t. You may be as mad as a bat, but there’s a fat chance that you hold no bad feelings against me. In which case I might receive another hundred points dark karma for killing you — and that is something I really don’t want to happen.”

Darkie didn’t like my words at all. Another tidal wave of darkness assaulted my mind — a surge of blackness which left no place for light. It enveloped me in its sickening shroud, disorienting me. My whole body shuddered as if electrocuted.

No idea how I managed to overcome it — but after a few seconds, the darkness subsided. The funny thing was, the two beastmen stood frozen in the same positions as I’d left them. Could it be that they hadn’t noticed my

absence from my own body? Possible. They might have thought I'd just zoned out thinking. Why not? Happens to everyone.

Litius was the first to break the uneasy silence. "What do you want from me?"

"From you, nothing. I have a pretty good idea of what you're like now. I need to have a word with your friend."

The two exchanged surprised stares. Litius twitched his nose. Woof replied by snapping his teeth, then turned to me. "What is it?"

"Do I understand correctly that your development branch allows you to reset one's karma?"

Once again Darkie tried to wrestle himself free — but he was weaker this time. Was he losing his strength? I wasn't having it any easier this time, though. My back erupted in sticky sweat; a lump of nausea rolled up my throat.

"That's right," Woof replied. "I can reset it back to zero, both positive and negative. The effect is only temporary though."

"Temporary?"

Admittedly, I didn't like it. This was a major setback to my plans.

"If I invest all of my points in it, the best I can do is eight days," Woof replied. "After that, it's gonna reverse back to its old reading."

I forced myself to think, hoping it might help me counter the disappointment. Of course. What made me think it could last forever? That would have made Resetter the most desirable development branch in the entire Interworld Network. All the powerful Orders would have tried to hunt this guy down, to lock him up and keep him as a slave.

Eight days, he'd said? Would I be able to do what I was planning to do in such a short span of time?

In any case, I had no other option. So I nodded. "Sounds good. Now listen to me, you two. I'm gonna let you go if you swear an oath not to harm Arts or myself. Plus Woof will do me a favor and reset me."

Once again the two beastmen exchanged stares. Woof, despite not being the smartest of the two, hurried to swear the oath. Litius tried to join in, which resulted in such a mess that I was obliged to stop him and wait until both of them had had their say. Throughout that time, Darkie hadn't eased his grip on me for one moment. Sweat slid down my temples, pouring into my eyes; I felt weaker with every passing second.

But at least I had every reason to be pleased with the other two. I even received a brief flashing message from the Game, allowing me to sheath the Gramr. I was more than happy to put the sword away: it kept feeding its energy to Darkie while I hadn't for one moment enjoyed holding it. I'd even had a funny feeling it had been burning my clenched hand.

Woof walked over to me slowly, as if approaching a horrible monster. His arm covered in silvery hair twitched as it reached out in my direction. Darkie was screaming like a banshee inside me.

Woof's almost human hairy fingers touched me, and...

All of your current karma values, both positive and negative, have been reset to zero by a Player in possession of the Resetter development branch.

+4980 karma points. Current level: 0.

I really can't describe the feeling. It was a bit like walking outside for the first breath of fresh air after a spell of a critical illness. All the colors seemed brighter, all the sounds deeper. My vertebrae crunched as my shoulders spread on their own accord.

“Eight days?” I repeated.

The wolf shivered. “Would you like me to swear on it?”

“Go ahead,” I said. I had no desire to put my trust into empty promises anymore.

In the meantime, I screwed my eyes to read yet another interesting message which had just added to my interface.

You’ve unblocked a Divine Avatar: Reaper. Unlocking additional abilities requires staying at 0 pt. Karma for the duration of 3 days.

“Can we go now?” the wolfman asked.

I looked up from the message, “Sure. I always keep my word,” I said with a meaningful look at Litius.

“Serge...”

“Don’t stoop to excuses, Lish. Please. You did what you did. It can’t be undone now. There’s nothing my four-second grace can do to help you out.”

Woof backed up until he stumbled over Litius, grabbed him by the hand and forced him out of the room. Litius resisted, trying to say something back to me, but in the end he disappeared down the corridor, unable to find the right words.

The lock rattled against the broken door frame, followed by the desperate stomping of feet taking steps three at a time.

I slumped onto the couch. My mind was in disarray, my heart spent. I was neither happy nor sad. I felt nothing — which was exactly what you were supposed to feel at zero karma. The only difference was, for the first

time in a very long time I really needed a smoke. And a drink. In less than twenty-four hours, I'd lost two of my friends.

Only two?

I reached for my cell and dialed the number. After the fifth ring, I was already about to hang up when it was answered.

"Yes?"

It sounded like she'd been undug from an early grave and forced to share a train compartment with a bunch of boozy conscripts for the duration of a Trans-Siberian journey. Having said that, what did I expect? I'd seen her drinking quite heavily only a couple of hours ago.

Much to my surprise, Arts didn't tell me what she thought of people who called their friends at.. what time was it, actually? Oh, five a.m. and counting.

"Serge?" Arts said, her voice blank and wheezy. "Is that you? Where... where are you?"

"I'm at Litius's place. I'm just about to leave."

"No, wait, what happened? Did someone attack you? Wait a second... what do you mean, 'at Litius's place'? Where is it?"

"Doesn't matter. Just forget it. We need to sort out that seal we've merged from the four stones."

"What, now? And how do you want us to sort that out? I know nothing about it."

"Well, I do. We just need to find out what happened to it. And you seem to know a guy who might actually help us. Listen up now..."

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Chapter 32

IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY, as wars raged and empires rose and fell, as humanity flourished only to plummet back into degradation, we have now approached the point where resources are greatly overrated. First, gold and silver took a step back, replaced by fistfuls of crunchy green notes which too are no more than a temporary convenience. Until finally, information stepped onto the scene as the most powerful and valuable of all existing assets.

The fabled adage of “who owns information, owns the world” has never been truer — and who would know it better than Nathan Rothschild who made a fortune by following his own advice, simply because he came into possession of unique intel. My ambitions were way humbler. All I needed to know was what kind of seal I had and why it wouldn’t work the way it was supposed to.

“That’s not the Archalish language at all,” Arts said, nonchalantly glancing over Litius’ note in her left hand. “That’s just a stupid protest pamphlet written in Ichvi, which is the beastpeople’s most common dialect.”

“A dialect!”

“Of course. Why not? They’re normal people like all the others. Okay, not exactly people, but you know what I mean. They too have all kinds of races, languages and ethnicities. I’ve no idea how that stupid fish eater wanted to unite them all.”

She shivered as she took another sip of coffee from her closed paper cup. While I was quite comfortable at 15 degrees Fahrenheit, I couldn’t say the same about her. She was freezing. Me, I threw my trench coat open and

rubbed my cheeks with snow, finally capable of enjoying a frosty winter morning for the first time in a long time. No black monster sitting within me, entangling me with his inky tentacles while waiting for me to take a single wrong step. Strangely enough, after a long series of deaths, tragedies and betrayals my life seemed to be starting anew.

“He’s late,” I said, glancing at the phone screen.

“He’ll come. He promised,” Arts took another sip of her coffee, then added with a note of pride in her voice, “He’s good like that.”

I nodded, then continued to wait, kicking around a lump of frozen snow.

Time! Exactly what I didn’t have much of right now. This was the first day of my karma countdown. Very soon, the negative karma would kick back in, so in the meantime, I was obliged to raise it as high as humanly possible to make sure it was either positive or at least at zero by the time it switched back to its original settings.

Then again, what was it the Guard had said about the risks of me acquiring a new sub-identity, a positive one this time? I really didn’t look forward to awakening a holier-than-though hypocrite in myself.

There was also another option. A questionable one maybe, but an interesting one nevertheless. In theory, I could leave everything as it was and just use the brand new Divine Avatar I’d just unblocked.

I opened my interface and reread the message,

You’ve unblocked a Divine Avatar: Reaper. Unlocking additional abilities requires preserving 0 pt. Karma for the duration of 3 days.

Current abilities:

Harvest of Blood. *Claims 50% hit points of all hostile creatures.*

Use: long-range

Range: 100 ft

Cooldown: 3 days

Dead Souls. *Allows you to summon the spirits of recently killed Players who used to fight on the summoner's side.*

Warning! Any such Players must be dead for no longer than 3 hours prior to the ability's activation.

Range: 300 ft

Cooldown: 5 days

Justice. *Summons a sledgehammer which strikes the summoner's attacker, stripping them of 90% of their hit points.*

Use: long-range

Cooldown: 24 hrs

What an interesting Avatar. Really. The abilities' cooldowns were quite decent, too. As for Justice, you could use it every day if you wanted to, no online registration or SMS confirmation required. And considering that in three days' time, I might receive three more abilities on top of that, provided I'd kept my karma at zero, this was a veritable windfall. I was seriously concerned that such a shower of freebies wouldn't do me any good — but still I was dying to find out what else the Reaper's Avatar might have in store for me.

"There he is," Arts said, crumpling the paper cup and lobbing it into a pile of shoveled snow.

“Hey, Arts, you can’t do that.”

“There’re no trash cans around, are there?”

“Well, what about your inventory?”

Arts tut-tutted and rolled her eyes. Still, she picked up the cup which instantly disappeared from her hands.

I gave her a thumbs-up as I peered at the entrance to the park.

Setting up a RV here was my idea. Firstly, the park was quiet and almost deserted on weekdays. You had to be either an alcoholic or a Player to venture out for a stroll on a freezing winter morning. And secondly, this was where I’d first met Arts’ brother. This was where we’d had him initiated.

Admittedly, he’d changed. Dramatically so, despite the short span of time that had elapsed.

His face was smooth and fresh. Gone were the horrible circles around his eyes. I could have sworn his skin had got a bit of color. No wonder: we Players weren’t like normal people who are obliged to book a long flight to some holiday destination just for a quick spell in the equatorial sun. All we Players needed to do was take a quick portal jump to the Maldives, or the Philippines or whatever took our fancy. The cost of the jump itself was a different question, of course, but I had a funny feeling that Arts picked up the tab for her brother’s needs.

“Hi,” I said, proffering my hand.

His handshake was surprisingly strong. “Hi,” he said non-committally. “Nice morning.”

I understood him. I used to do the same thing all the time. When you’re not sure about your standing with a person, not really knowing if

you can drop formalities, the safest thing is to talk about the weather. Works every time.

“Call me Febo,” he said.

“Febo... isn’t it something from Greek mythology?”

“No,” he said. “It’s short for my nickname which is Flash Bomber. Febo for short.”

It took all of my willpower not to smile. The kid was trying so hard to behave like an adult and keep an appropriately grave expression on his face — but despite his recent initiation and his admittedly interesting development branch, he was still the young kid I remembered. The terminally ill kid who’d now become immortal. And his appearance would always remind us of him.

“Nice name,” I said. “Simple but cool. Well, I suppose I should ask you about your school life and stuff, but honestly, that’s not what we’re interested in. We need something from you.”

“Information,” Febo said with a confident nod. “That’s what everybody wants from me.”

I cast an uncomprehending look at Arts.

“He works with the Guards,” she explained, “in exchange for their protection and a bit of money. We decided that this would be the wisest move. Sooner or later, all the Players would have found out all about him, anyway.”

“You might be right,” I said. “It’s none of my business, anyway. You’re right, Febo. I need information. I’d like to know everything you can tell me about this thing.”

I produced the massive stone tablet — a seal, according to the Gatekeeper, — and handed it to him.

Febo unhurriedly removed his leather gloves and gingerly accepted the artifact. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as if taking in a lungful of air before diving. He paused for a long time, then exhaled. And again. A deep breath, a pause, an exhale. Don’t get me wrong: I have nothing against meditation; it’s just that I’d had no idea that “scanning” the artifact might be such a long-winded process.

Finally Febo opened his eyes and handed the seal back to me.

“You know what it’s for, don’t you?” he asked, squinting one eye at me.

I felt like a cheating schoolkid who’d failed to fool the teacher. “To travel between worlds, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. It’s extremely rare and incredibly valuable. I don’t need to explain its nature to you, do I?”

“Not really. This is Gatekeepers’ creation.”

He nodded. “Totally. In which case, what do you want me for? You seem to know everything already.”

“But why doesn’t it work?”

His face slackened in a crooked grin which disappeared just as quickly. He switched his gaze to Arts as if trying to ascertain that what I’d just said wasn’t a joke. Seeing his sister’s serious face, he shrugged.

“Elementary,” he said. “It’s flat.”

“What do you mean, flat?”

“The way I understood, its integrity was compromised,” he said, pointing at the tablet. “At some point, someone must have split this, er, *thing*—”

“It’s a seal,” I said.

“Okay, so someone must have split this seal into several pieces. They did it very crudely, too — barbarically so, — forcing the item to lose a great deal of energy. The resulting fragments preserved some of the artifact’s old powers but they lost its main property, which was to open portals to other worlds. Over time, their energies dwindled too. And this final merger resulted in an even greater loss of their energy. So now this artifact is flat like a spent battery.”

I gulped. “Would it be possible to recharge it?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Same way as you charge up all magic items, by using dust.”

“How much dust do you need? A couple of kilos?”

“Well, I dunno. A ton? Maybe more.”

My eyes opened wide. *“How much?”*

“It’s only a guess based on the item’s properties,” Febo said with a helpless gesture. “Basically, it takes a lot. Really a lot.”

Arts and I looked at each other like two idiots who’d just been told that the diamonds they see in the heaps of freshly driven snow are in fact bits of sunlight reflected off droplets of frozen water.

“It’s gonna take me a lifetime of working my balls off just to charge it up,” I finally said.

“There’s a quicker way of doing it,” Arts began, then fell silent as if afraid of what she’d just said. “Only... it’s, how can I put it... it’s impossible.”

“Did you say impossible? Mind giving me more detail?”

“There’s a place where there’re shit tons of dust. That’s actually where it comes from in the first place. I’m sure there’s plenty there for what you need it for, and then some.”

“What place is that?”

“It’s what we call the zero world, right at the center of the Universe. We call it Anchor World. That’s where Gatekeepers come from. It’s their home world.”

My breathing seized. I rummaged through my interface until I found the tab listing all my titles and reread the message I’d earned for gifting the Inturia fragment to the Atrain Gatekeeper:

You’ve helped Gatekeepers.

You’ve received a new title: Pilgrim to Anchor World, allowing you to visit the Central Worlds.

“You’ll be laughing,” I said to Arts, “but it’s not such a bad plan, after all. I’d say it’s a very good one.”

“Arts, can I go now?” Febo asked with a quizzical glace at his sister. “I can skip social studies but not math. Our math teacher hates it when we’re late.”

It suddenly dawned on me that he didn’t call her “Auntie Rita” anymore. They were on equal terms now, both of them Players in their own right.

“Sure, thanks a lot,” Arts replied. “Your knowledge of natural science seems to improve every day.”

He dissolved in a bashful smile. We exchanged another handshake.

As I watched him trot back toward the park entrance, I couldn’t shake off the inklings of an idea — something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It had nothing to do with Gatekeepers; something totally unrelated to the seal, but...

“Hey, Febo! Wait a sec! Stop, I tell you!”

I ran toward him and grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to face me. Febo tensed, expecting the worst, but he had enough composure not to try to struggle free.

“I’ve got something for you,” I said. “Something only you can have.”

I reached into my inventory, took out the Gramr and handed it to him.

Febo accepted it, uncomprehending, then dropped it to the ground as if the sword was still red-hot from forging. He looked fearfully at me, hesitating, then bent down and picked it up. Immediately his breathing seized as if he were a winter swimmer emerging from a hole in the ice. A shudder ran over his body.

“This is a very dangerous weapon,” he finally said.

“From what I was told, it used to belong to one of the Gatekeepers.”

“That’s bullshit,” Febo interrupted me. “Having said that...” he fell silent, “scanning” the sword.

Finally, he offered his verdict.

“This weapon was made by a Player. He was very skillful in his craft. Probably, a God, but most definitely a Player. But after that... I can sense a Gatekeeper’s vibes on it too. No idea where they come from. But this is an extremely dangerous weapon. The Player who made it invested a part of himself in it. And considering his OP status, this thing is quite capable of eventually bringing its new owner under its own control, or... or, how can I put it... it’s quite capable of altering their mind.”

I exploded into a bout of choking cough. Although I doubted very much that it was the sword that had actually awakened Darkie within me, it had definitely served as a catalyst in his rise to power.

“This is exactly why I’m giving it to you,” I said, nodding. “You’re the only person who can understand the kind of danger it harbors within. If you feel you can’t handle it, just destroy it.”

“This sword used to belong to one particular Player for a very long time. I can sense your connection. Was it your father? A family member?”

“He was my mentor.”

“So do you really think I can destroy it if he failed to do so?”

I felt very uncomfortable. This was only a boy, a young kid still learning the ropes of being a Player. And I was about to lay this heavy burden on his shoulders.

Still, as I kept looking into his serious eyes, I felt strangely confident that he was up to it. Something — either his terminal illness or his recent initiation — had lent him a faint aura of wisdom. This is what happens when a careless adolescence is tinged by an approaching death.

“But I think you’re right,” Febo said, putting the Gramr away into his own inventory. “This sword should belong to someone who knows all about it. I’ll think what I can do with it.”

And so he left, for good this time, without saying goodbye. He didn’t turn back once. The freshly driven snow crunched under his boots. A teenager with one of the most powerful development branches — and now also with a sword to match.

I just hoped he would be okay.

“So what’s the plan?” Arts asked.

She was frozen to the bone as usual, adamant about wearing those flimsy little boots. Still, she hadn’t complained once, making it clear that she was going to grin and bear for as long as necessary.

“Let’s go,” I said. “I think I saw a café over there.” It’s not a good idea to discuss a general battle plan on the go, especially when one of the said plan’s main actors is missing from the scene.”

It took us a good quarter of an hour to get to the place. By then, Arts was completely frozen. Which explains her lightning reaction to the server’s arrival:

“A brandy and two coffees. If you make it quick I’ll make it worth your while.”

I chuckled. “Well, I suppose it’s not as decadent as a champagne breakfast.”

“Too early for champagne,” she snapped. “We don’t have anything to celebrate yet. We still need to get there, and it ain’t gonna be easy. We need to come up with a plan.”

“Arts, I...”

“The Central Worlds aren’t a tourist destination. You just can’t come and go as you please. Too easy to do something stupid over there.”

“Arts, I...”

“And we still need to work out how to get to Anchor World. Which isn’t that easy, I tell you.”

The server came back with a glass of brandy and some sliced lemon on a plate. I waited for her to stop talking as she downed the amber liquid in one big gulp.

“Arts, I think I’m gonna go on my own,” I finally said.

She spat some of the brandy back into the glass and spilled the rest of it onto the table, coughing so hard I was obliged to get up and pat her on the back. Finally, she turned to me, wiping the tears streaking down her face.

“Are you freakin’ mad?”

“On the contrary. I’m trying to think straight. This might be a one-way ticket, literally.”

“What, after all we’ve been through? With Traug dead and that fish eater a flippin’ traitor, you’re now expecting me to stay behind doing nothing, pretending it’s business as usual? While you... you’re the only person who really helped me. No one has even come close to what you’ve done for me. You... you’ve always been...”

Her eyes filled with tears — real ones this time, not the ones caused by the earlier coughing bout. Real hot human tears which have been a universal heart opener on this planet since time immemorial.

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s why I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Don’t you understand that I just can’t let you go? Because I... I’ve been meaning to tell you all this time... I...”

“I know,” I hurried to interrupt her, afraid of overhearing her unwitting confession. “It’s just that I really don’t have anything to offer back at the moment. I’m sorry. I need to become a strong Player first. I must get rid of the commoner in me holding me back. Only then can I complete this journey and find out what it is all about.”

This conversation had been in the offing for a long time. But as often happens, now that we finally had it, all the right words had disappeared from my mind. I hadn’t felt this awkward for a long time.

Still, I had a funny feeling I was doing the right thing. Arts was a cool girl but I wasn’t that crazy mad about her, after all. She was a good friend though, and I was afraid I might ruin what we already had by making a move which I really saw no point in making.

“Okay,” Arts nodded, watching the server set two coffee cups on the table. “You need to become a strong Player now. You need to complete this journey and see what it’s all about. And that’s exactly what I’m going to help you with. As a friend.”

I still could hear a flicker of hope in her voice. “Arts, I...”

“If you say no, I’ll just follow you. I’ll tag after you like a shadow wherever you go. From one world to the next. You’ve got no choice, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t even know what awaits me there.”

“Of course. You’re the expert in getting into trouble. Paddling up shit creek is your specialty. So you really need someone who could bail you out of a pickle. So once again: what’s the plan?”

“Oh.”

At the moment, I really wasn’t up to it. The girl had the determination of a steam roller. If I sent her home now, she was sure to follow me across

the worlds.

I took a sip of coffee and began to explain, “First, I need to take stock of my assets, so to say. Sell everything I don’t need. Empty my bank account. Say goodbye to my sister. Incidentally, she’s the only one of my family who still remembers me. I also need to find a new home for Bumpkin because we can’t really take him with us, can we?”

“Okay, and then what?”

“And then,” I paused, giving one last thought to our future, “then we shall bid this world a final goodbye.”

End of Book Four

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About the Author

A passionate reader since childhood, Dmitry Bilik loved nothing better than to create worlds of his own. He devoured classical sci fi and fantasy - so no wonder that by his early teens, he'd begun writing his own stories.

His path to authorhood, however, proved windier than he'd imagined. Dmitry graduated from college and went on to study at university. Then he got married. All those years, he treated writing as a hobby - as his own way to escape reality. Only ten years after he'd first put pen to paper, Dmitry started publishing his writing on the Internet, experimenting with a number of genres.

Today, *Interworld Network* is Dmitry's most popular series, combining the best of LitRPG and urban fantasy.

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[1] As the series is set in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, the author uses actual landmarks throughout the book. In this case, he describes an existing high-end fitness club in Shcherbakov Street.

[2] About $80

[3] Sochi: a Russian seaside resort

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